

Can These Bones Live?
Ezekiel 37: 1-14
Don Lincoln

It was probably 6 or 8 weeks ago that I received an email invitation from Pastor Jon asking me to lead the chapel service on March 25th. Jon is great at getting those invitations for leadership roles out weeks in advance. I responded to the email affirmatively, and turned my computer calendar to the week of March 25th because I know I won't remember that weeks later, and so I put a reminder on Monday and Wednesday of that week, so I could insert a reminder to select a hymn and text for chapel.

And there it was. In bold letters on Wednesday, March 25th. The annually recurring reminder for me on that day: "Call Dad."

Wednesday was my father's birthday. And for years a reminder has popped up on every March 25 to give him a call. For those who don't know – my father died this past September, a year to the day after my mother died. As you might imagine, it was a poignant moment when I saw that reminder to call my dad, and knew for the first time in my 65 years, I wouldn't talk to my father on his birthday. So, I thought to myself those weeks ago, when March 25th chapel **DOES** come around, I'll share that experience with the folks at chapel that day.

That was my plan. Until I looked at the texts for today, and saw Ezekiel 37 – the Dry Bones, and knew I needed to save that story for today.

Ezekiel 37. Dry bones. Israel is in exile, having been taken captive by Babylon. And the exile was not a short event. We're what – WEEKS – into this season of social distancing? Israel was in the wilderness for 40 years after release from Egypt; and this exile in Babylon was even longer.

I'm guessing at first it was not hard for the people to keep up hope. Hope that God would rescue them from Babylon. But as weeks became months; and months drew into years, and years piled up into decades, and STILL they languished in captivity, despair began to replace hope. Finally it had been too long; they considered themselves as good as dead. Their expectations for a better future as alive as a valley full of dry, disconnected bones.

That is the vision given to Ezekiel. And when God asks Ezekiel "Can these bones lives?," the prophet gives a careful and measured reply: "O Lord God, You know." Perhaps Ezekiel said this with a robust confidence, "O God, You know that You can do all things. If You want them to live, they will live!"

Or perhaps it was no more than a tired whisper: “God, I just don’t know; it all seems lost. Do You see how bad it is? But if anyone knows, You do.”

God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. Couldn’t God do something without Ezekiel’s help? Well, yes and no. Of course the sovereign God could act alone, but God chooses instead to act in concert with Ezekiel. One more instance of a biblical record that has at its core a God who is not aloof, but who acts in and through cooperative relationships with human beings.

So God asks Ezekiel to work with Him. It may not appear practical at first. God does not tell Ezekiel to start gathering up bones and sorting them out into skeletons. That would require a physician’s hand. God asks Ezekiel to do what Ezekiel does. Prophecy! Perhaps if Ezekiel had been a singer, God would’ve said “Sing to these bones!” If he had been a baker, the order might have been, “Bake for these bones.” The command fits who Ezekiel is. So Ezekiel prophesies, and bones are knit together; sinew and flesh and skin – and he eventually prophesies to the breath, and the bodies come alive.

God then explains to Ezekiel what this vision he has just witnessed and participated in is all about. The exiles are saying, “We might as well be dead, because we have no future. There is no hope for us.” God proclaims they do indeed have a future because God will revive them and even return them to their homeland. God’s spirit will be in them and they will know the Lord. The source of their hope is in the God who has not abandoned them, and who continues to be with them EVEN in their exile. EVEN IN THEIR EXILE.¹

You see, fulfillment wasn’t Ezekiel’s purpose. His aim was to rekindle hope, to help his people once again have a reason to go on.

We human beings need such encouragement. In the face of loss – loss of economic security; limiting of community; the death of a family member or friend – or perhaps the loss of the illusion that we can control all things, or the loss of believing that in this advanced nation we are immune to pandemics.....whatever the loss is in this season of loss, Ezekiel knows every season of loss is one where we find it easy to sink into despair. So Ezekiel prophesies.

Upon hearing Ezekiel’s prophecy, a wonderful thing started to happen. The later chapters of Ezekiel record a veritable blueprint for rebuilding the temple which had been destroyed. People began debating the details. Some even disagreed with Ezekiel, suggesting alternatives.

So involved was everyone in developing plans that they failed to notice the most important thing that had come to pass; they had all accepted as established fact that someday it was going to happen; they were going to get through this. Vision had become expectation. Hope had become anticipation. That is how history is made.²

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes his twenty-seven years of imprisonment. It was not where he wanted to be or where he was supposed to be.

Over half those years were spent under the blistering sun in the lime quarries of Robben Island. The conditions were horrible; the work was killing Mandela and his fellow prisoners. The guards were cruel; that prison was designed to extinguish all hope, and it was clearly working. That is, until Mandela and the prisoners began to sing.

They sang songs in their native tongue that the guards did not speak. They sang folk songs, and spiritual songs, and even songs that reminded them of home. And as they sang, their hope came back to life. And so did they.

After 14 years on Robben Island, Mandela was allowed to see his daughter for the first time since he was imprisoned. She brought his new granddaughter he had never seen. In their tradition, the grandfather names the grandchildren. So when his daughter asked him what the name would be, Mandela immediately said “Zaziwe” – which means hope.

Mandela writes, “The name has special meaning for me. The hope found in prison never left me – and now it never would. I was convinced this child would be part of a new generation of South Africans for whom the disease called Apartheid would be a distant memory – that was my dream.”

When Nelson Mandela named that child “Hope,” he was only halfway through his imprisonment. He had a long, long way to go; some would say he had no reason to hope; that he and his people were no more than a pile of dry bones. But hope, remember, is revolutionary. Hope looks not at how things are, but at God’s dreams for how things will be.³

On the last Saturday of this past September – I got word that my father, who was in the skilled nursing section of his retirement community in Akron, OH, was failing more rapidly than expected. I had to officiate at a wedding that afternoon, so immediately following I started to drive to Akron.

As you might guess, I’ve been around people’s last hours more than a few times. So, I knew in my mind what I would probably find when I arrived. Dry bones. A shell of the man who had mentored and loved me; probably cracked lips; parched tongue; breath shallow; and barely evident. “Can these bones live?” I thought to myself as I was driving, “NO, these bones cannot live.” I’m the son of an engineer. If nothing else, an engineer teaches you how to discern the inevitable. I knew what I was likely to find when I arrived in Akron.

But halfway through my journey across the turnpike, I rounded a bend, and this is the image through my windshield.



And in that sky I saw the promise. Not that these bones would live. But that we would get through this. There would be a new day. I might not be able to call my dad on his birthday again – and might not see him for many years to come. It would be a long exile from one another. But there WOULD be a new day. A day built on a common hope we share that God was with us. Hope was alive.

Friends, you and I are in a season of dry bones – our time in exile may last longer than we can begin to imagine. It's a season of exile from one another; a season where death seems to least have gotten a toehold.

But do not lose hope. God is not through with us; and neither should we be through with God. Trust in the Lord. Hope in the Lord. And do whatever it is the LORD has equipped you to do to be an encouragement in this season.

Some of us are teaching yoga. Some of us are telling stories. Some are helping others with technology, and some of us are setting up virtual happy hours with friends – to share an hour over a glass of wine in this time of separation. Some of us are picking up groceries, or a prescription for those who cannot or should not go out. Some of us are ordering take out from restaurants who have served us faithfully for years hoping that we might be able to sustain them in this time. Some are offering medical skills in caring for others, at no small risk to their own lives.

We are all doing something – for the sake of the common good. God is using all of us, to kindle hope for the days to come. May it be so. AMEN.

1. Rebecca Abts Wright, *Connections* Commentary, Year A, Volume 2, commentary on Ezekiel 37.
2. Walter Wink, “*These Bones Shall Live*,” Christian Century, 1994.
3. Craig Barnes, Shadyside Presbyterian Church, sermon on Ezekiel 37, “*Getting Back to Life*,” May 15, 2005.