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Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

If you are like me, when you hear this scripture the first thing that comes to your mind is the familiar spiritual, “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, now hear the word of the Lord... toe bone connected to the foot bone, foot bone connected to the heel bone” and so on and so on. This is a song that many of us sang as children. We sang this song with joy, because the end product of all these dry bones connecting is new life and restoration, but let’s for a moment just dwell in the valley of dry bones.

In this scripture, God took Ezekiel on a journey to a valley that was full of bones. God tells Ezekiel to look around the valley and take it all in. What he sees is a very dry valley that is filled with many bones. The bones themselves are so dry that they are almost dust themselves. There is not a single sign that life is possible in this valley. These bones represent Israel in exile. They feel so cut off from God, their source of life, and their home that they cannot possibly be vital and alive again.

From the moment that God’s people arrived in the promised land, they were warned about what would happen if they lived unfaithfully. Even with fair warning, they forgot God; they worshipped idols; they ignored God’s demand to extend justice to all; and their worship was shallow, more lip-service than from the heart. As a result, God allowed Babylon to scorch the land, destroy Jerusalem and take away the best and brightest among them into exile. The land was left lifeless and dry, empty of the vitality that it once contained.

While we may not have experienced this kind of exile, we have all experienced “dry spells” in our spiritual life. We may say things like: “I feel spiritually dried up,” “I haven’t heard from God in years,” or “My prayers feel as though they never leave the room.” These situations feel hopeless when we are in them. God seems absent and we feel dried up. Though these moments feel so hopeless, the cry of the heart comes from people who are far from spiritually dead. What might seem like death is actually a sign that life is possible because real change comes through brutal honesty and vulnerability before God. There is hope found in fully embracing spiritual despair. Ezekiel had to see the total death and destruction of the dry bones in the dry valley before he could see the possibility for new life.

When Ezekiel see the bones, God asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?” to which Ezekiel responds, “O Lord God, you know.” In Ezekiel’s eyes, there wasn’t much possibility for life to emerge out of the desperate site before his eyes, but he knew better than to limit God’s ability to bring about a miracle. Through Ezekiel’s prophetic word, God is indeed able to bring new life to these dry bones.

To the Hebrew mind, which operated from a strong sense of bodily resurrection, the chaotic scene of dry bones abandoned in a valley was horrifying. This isn’t simply a vision of death but a death that is so complete that there is no chance of resurrection—no chance that life in any form can return to them. However, this is the miracle of this passage—even though the bones cannot possibly hold any life, this is no stumbling block to the Spirit of God. As Ezekiel prophesied, the bones begin to rattle and come together bone to bone. Sinew and flesh cover the bones and the breath of God brings new life to the bodies. What was once dusty, dry, and dead is now alive... shake, rattle and roll.

This scene of the Spirit breathing into the dry bones is similar to the dust into which God first breathed the breath of life at creation. The difference is that creation called into being that

which never was. This scene from Ezekiel is not creation—this is redemption. This is restoration of what was meant to be.

This vision given to Ezekiel spoke to the situation of God's people. Like Ezekiel, they were to fully acknowledge the death and decay in and around them. They needed to acknowledge their spiritual dryness and the ways in which they had cut themselves off from God's living water, while still having hope in God's new life that can be breathed into even the most dire of situations. God shows in this vision that in place of death, God alone can bring life. The people of God will not be able to bring themselves out of exile, it will be only through God's invitation. God will re-create his people and restore them to their original purpose.

This scripture, while originally meant to mirror the situation of God's people in exile, also raises the question for us today— where are the bone yards around us? Where are we in need of God's restoring breath? What does this vision from Ezekiel inspire us to believe and do about our dry bones?

It is said that the great violinist, Nicolo Paganini, willed his marvelous violin to Genoa — the city of his birth — but only on the condition that the instrument never be played upon. It was an unfortunate restriction, for wood, as long as it is used and handled, will show little wear. As soon as it is discarded, it begins to decay. The exquisite, mellow-toned violin has become worm-eaten in its beautiful case, valueless except as a relic. This abandoned instrument is a reminder that a life without service to others loses all its value and meaning.¹

Our death and decay may be due to our dependence on our things, our possessions; or it may be our lack of confidence and willingness to step outside of our comfort zone. It may be our lack of compassion for the vulnerable and underprivileged. Or it may be our inability to truly care for those who share the same space we do. Whatever it is that dries out our bones, God calls us to look at them honestly so that our lives don't lose all value and meaning.

It is only by identifying the places where we are spiritually dead and decaying that we can welcome in the restoration God offers. It is only by recognizing that it is by the grace of God's Spirit that we can be revived. It is the Spirit alone that can transform us and renew us with the breath of life.

A woman walked into a Presbyterian church in Virginia, unsure of what to expect. She had grown up in a home with no religion and no talk of God. But the members of the church welcomed her, befriended her, included her, and nurtured her in the Christian faith. After being baptized and becoming a church member, she said to the congregation, "Just a few years ago, I tiptoed into the narthex as one who did not believe in God. Your support transformed me, and I stand before you now confidently and say that I do now believe in God. I know I could just leave it at that, but you as a congregation have always expected me to go a bit deeper, to explore that more. Part of your nurture of faith has asked me to seek meaning so I can live into that which I say I believe. So, to say that I believe in God means for me that I believe that hope is stronger than despair, that pain will always be followed by healing, that within darkness there is light, that death is never final, that in any sadness there is opportunity for joy."

God's word has life-giving power. God's breath can revive individuals, congregations, and communities. Things are never so hopeless that God cannot renew life. Even in the driest of valleys containing the driest of bones, God can still pull us out of our own exiles and restore us to whom we were created to be.

Today is the first Sunday of a new year. Maybe you are already uplifted by the hope of a new start — a fresh calendar to inspire new, healthy goals and renewed commitment to

¹ homileticonline.com

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relationships. Maybe you approach this new year as worried as last year. Things are only getting worse. However, you approach this new year, hear these words from Ezekiel calling us to accept our death and decay so that we can invite in the rejuvenating Spirit. This Spirit can bring back what once was — our vitality, our faithfulness, our excitement. If your spiritual life has been stagnant or even faltering, pray to God on this first Sunday of the new year for the Spirit to breathe new life into you. And you will find that the toe bone connects with the foot bone, and the foot bone connects with the heel bone, and you will receive new flesh and sinew and breath, for nothing is impossible with God. Now hear the word of the Lord, dry bones. Shake, rattle and roll until our very bodies are refreshed and renewed. May it be so for us and for our church. Amen.