

Life, Life, Life!
May 23 2021/Pentecost Sunday
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:22-27
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois
Matt Matthews

Imagine the elderly man sitting at the breakfast table after his wife has died, after the grown kids have gone home. He sits alone in the house, alone at the table, all alone in this wide world.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

Imagine the eighth-grade girl who wasn't invited to the 8th grade dance. Girls from the neighborhood filled a minivan and went together as a group. But they didn't invite this girl to go with them. There was a dress she saw in a store window in the weeks prior to the dance. She had wondered if her parents would have bought it for her had she been invited. But she hadn't been invited. And she didn't go.

Both this lonely, old man and this uninvited girl live in your neighborhood. You see her walking to and from the park. She weighs all of 91 pounds, but her heart alone is heavier than that. And he walks his dog hardly noticing the world around him.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

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I'm sorry to say that most of us have been to that valley. And we all know at least somebody who's in it right now. In every direction, dry bones litter the ground. No life. No hope. No *chance* of hope.

But listen to the prophet Ezekial. He sees the valley God is showing him. He sees the dry bones. He feels the despair. God asks, "Can these bones live?" And listen to what the Ezekial *doesn't* say:

"Are you crazy God? These bones are gone, long gone, and deader than dead. This is as hopeless a place as there is in all the earth."

No. The Ezekial doesn't say that. He sees the barren, desolate valley of bones. He feels the dry heat of hopelessness. "O LORD God," he says, "you know."

Ezekial knows that God is God, and God can do what God will do. Hope that is seen is not hope, says Paul. And if Ezekial has hope—and I think he does—then Ezekial has hope that is not based on what he sees. Because all he sees is miles and miles of dry bones.

- *It looks hopeless, but you, O LORD God, can bring hope from despair.*
- *Despair and death surround me, but you, O LORD God, can bring life.*
- *My life's partner is gone, taken too young, and I feel afraid and alone, but you, O LORD God, can heal me and help me and restore me to the land of the living.*
- *No one picked me for the dance, but you, O LORD God, have not lost sight of my broken heart, and you hear my cry, and I know that at least you will never overlook me like all the others have.*

We know the story from there. God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones. And what God says will happen, does happen. The bones come together. Then flesh covers the bones. And, then, the breath. *And the breath came into those dry bones, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

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God's word is like that. It changes things.

All around us we hear voices saying "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." We have said words like those ourselves.

But God says: *I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."*

Ezekial had the right idea. When God asked him if that valley of bones could live, Ezekial didn't say what was obvious. He didn't say what he *saw*: "No, God, these bones are gone, long gone, and deader than dead. This is as hopeless a place as there is in all the earth."

Nope. Ezekial said, "O Lord God, you know." I don't know, but you do. With you all things are possible.

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I need to be reminded of what God can do with situations that feel hopeless. Sue Grey, president and CEO of our local United Way, recently reported these staggering facts.

- Nearly half of the households in our community struggle to make ends meet every single month. While people of all races struggle financially, a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic families are ALICE families.
- One-in-five of our children live in poverty. It also disproportionately impacts Black and Hispanic children.
- More than one 'shots fired' incident a week has been recorded in 2021 alone. Last year was record breaking, and this year is on track to exceed numbers from last year.
- Child abuse and neglect cases are some of the highest across the state.
- 15% of households in Champaign County are food insecure.
- Champaign Unit 4 and Urbana Unit 116 schools reported 45% of incoming Kindergarten students did not demonstrate any kindergarten readiness.
- Unit 4 data shows 93% of African American males in 3rd grade are not meeting standard expectations in Reading/Language Arts; in Math is 90%.

I look around and I see a valley of dry bones.

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Ezekial reminds us what God does with dry bones. God pours out his Spirit and those bones begin to rattle, and life pours over, into, and out of those dry bones, and those dry bones are people, are communities, is a nation—alive and well, alive and dancing.

God brings life from despair: which is why organizations like DREAAM work in our community to turn around all those numbers that Sue Grey writes about. Yes, the situation feels dire. Lives are being lost on our streets. But DREAAM is rubbing God's Spirit on all the broken places and lives are being saved.

God brings life from despair: which is why Rob Dalhouse at CU at Home helps our neighbors without an address.

God brings life from despair: which is why our mission partners Bob and Kristi Rice are soon heading back to the South Sudan.

God brings life from despair: which is why we keep investing in upstream solutions that enhance systems affecting complex social change over the long-term.

God brings life from despair: which is why the elderly widower keeps on keeping on. It's an act of deep faith.

There's an eighth-grade girl from his church who lives down the street. She walks her dog in the evening. He walks his. They walk together. She tells him how bad it feels being left out. He tells her that his late wife had 47 boxes of shoes that he finally had the energy recently to give away.

They are the dry bones under God's good care. The dust has been covered with living flesh, and those once-broken bones are up and walking, and that walking down their neighborhood street with dogs tugging at their leashes becomes the first stumbling steps of a dance, a new day, a whole new life.

*Mortal, can **these** bones live?*

Contrary to the physical evidence—*yes*.

God uses prophets by the name of Ezekial, Tracy, Lola, Eric, Carol, Steve, Tom, Vern, Jeanette. God tells these prophets to speak, to care, to nourish and nurture—and these bones start to rattle and dance. And God breathes God's Spirit and there is life, life, life.

That's what God does.

That's who God is.

Thanks be to God. Alleluia!