

Dry Bones Rattling

August 29, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Friends, I'm not going to ask for a show of hands. But how many of you are tired?

Maybe it's because your coffee hasn't kicked in yet.

Or because the summer heat doesn't seem to want to let up.

Maybe you're tired after a year and a half of navigating the ever-changing waters of COVID.

Or for those of you who stay plugged into national and world news, it seems like the moment we get through one crisis, the next one hits. And oi. The world crises right now. For those of you who make your living off of the growing seasons – praise God this year has been a bountiful one so far! And ohmygoodness, a bountiful season takes a *lot* of extra work.

Teachers and school staff, getting back into the rhythm of school this week, with all kinds of uncertainty around how this year is going to go.

Kids, getting back into the rhythm of school this week, and it's like every night they are a little puddle of overtired goo.

When we get tired, when we get overwhelmed, sometimes it is really hard to put our best foot forward. To exercise those “fruits of the spirit” – love, patience, kindness, generosity, self-control. Instead, patience wears thin. Our fuse gets cut short. We may find ourselves a little snippier than normal. Not as kind as we might ordinarily be. And underneath the surface of all of that, are people desperately trying to hang on to hope.

If any of this resonates with you, then this sermon series that we are beginning today and continuing throughout the month of September is for you. It's for all of us who are feeling a little tired, a little worn, a little bedraggled; it's for all of us searching for a measure of hope to hang onto in the midst of a world, a time, a season in which our inner reserves may be running thin. For the next five weeks we are going to be exploring a series of stories and passages from scripture that are meant to breathe life into places of lifelessness.

And we are beginning with a well-known story from a not-so-well-known book. Quick show of hands: how many of you, when you think “I should open my Bible and read it” tend to turn straight to Ezekiel as your #1, go-to book?

Yeah. Me either. We might turn to the Psalms, or to the stories of the gospels, or the teachings of the Apostle Paul, or even to the foundational stories of Genesis and Exodus, or of the Kings, if we want some really good Old Testament storytelling...but some of these more obscure prophets – most of us don't spend a whole lot of time plumbing the depths of what they have to say.

So, Ezekiel was a prophet from the southern kingdom of Judah, who received his call as a prophet during the time of the Babylonian exile. Before the exile, Ezekiel was a priest in Judah, and was taken into exile with the first wave of exiles.

So, if you will remember your Old Testament history, you will remember that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had made world domination his mission in life (or, at least, he wanted to take over the entire Ancient Near East), and when he invaded Judah in 597 BC he started by bringing *only* the king, the nobles, the priests, and the wealthy and influential people to Babylon, in an effort to win them over, thus making it easier to influence the rest of the Israelite people when they were later brought into exile a decade later. As a priest, Ezekiel was one of these very first exiles. And pretty much immediately, as soon as he gets to Babylon, he starts prophesying – proclaiming to the people of Judah that they must turn around; they must return to God. Or else they are going to face complete and utter destruction.

Now, of course, as human beings we don't tend to heed warnings very well. Ezekiel was just that "crazy guy" spouting ridiculous things, and so the people of Judah didn't listen. They turned a blind eye toward what was going on in the world around them and they ignored all the voices of the prophets crying out to them – not just Ezekiel. But also Daniel. And Habakkuk. And Jeremiah.

And so, as we know, God allowed the exile to continue. More waves of people were deported from Judah and forced to march around the desert and down to the foreign land of Babylon. And finally, when the bulk of the people had been deported, the temple was raided and ransacked and destroyed and the city was demolished. All that remained behind in Judah were the poorest of the poor – the cast-offs who nobody, not even the Babylonians, wanted.

And this basically sent all of Israel into crisis. Not only were they now strangers living in a strange land, trying to learn a new language that they did not understand; trying to navigate cultural customs that made no sense to them; but their entire religious life was thrown into a tailspin. There were times during the exile that the Israelites were forced to worship in secret, when their religious observances like praying and observing the sabbath and performing their ritual sacrifices were made illegal. But the bigger question for the Israelites was a lot more basic than that.

If you will remember, back during their "glory days" – back when their country was strong and the monarchy was united as one (not this "northern and southern kingdom" nonsense) and their kings were at least relatively faithful, King Solomon had fulfilled one of his father's dreams by building a temple – building a house for God. Building not just a place for the Israelite people to worship, but a place where God himself dwelled. If people wanted to connect with God, they would come to the temple to do it.

Never mind that God has always been a God who had journeyed with the people wherever they went, whether they were wandering in the desert or planted in the

promised land, God was wherever the people were. But no, now David, and then later Solomon, wanted to basically give God a palace. And from then on, the people basically equated the temple with God.

So when the temple was destroyed and the people were sent far, far away from their home, one of the greatest fears that they had was that God was destroyed too. That with no temple to worship in, there was no longer a God to worship. Or else, that God had abandoned them.

And so they pretty much spent the next several decades looking backward.

Remember when our kings used to fear God?

Remember when we would go to the temple and we could just *feel* the presence of God?

Remember when we were free? When we were independent? When we were our own people? When we didn't have to answer to these foreign kings and rulers?

Remember when we would pray, and God would answer?

And sometimes, in their constant looking back and remembering, their nostalgia turned into a deep lament. Laments – prayers of despair – which we read over and over and over again throughout the book of Psalms.

Psalm 6: O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.

Psalm 22: My hands and feet have shriveled; I can count all my bones.

Psalm 31: My strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away.

Psalm 102: For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace.

And in our scripture reading today: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

“You want to talk about bones?” Ezekiel asks them. “Okay. Let’s talk about bones.” And so he tells them a story of a vision that he had. And in this vision he was gazing over a vast countryside, filled with nothing but wasted, dried out bones. We weren’t talking here about people who had recently died, whose bodies were still somewhat intact. There were no tendons or ligaments still remaining, holding these bones together. They were old, and dry, and bleached by the sun, all of the bones scattered into one big mess. There were so many of them, and they were so old and so scattered, that you couldn’t tell where one skeleton ended and the next one began.

This wasn’t like the story of Lazarus who had been dead only four days and was starting to stink, or like Jairus’s daughter who had died just minutes ago, and Jesus is able to pass it off as “she’s not dead; she’s just sleeping.” In both of these stories, the people had died recently enough that they still bore some vestiges of their former selves. But in the case of this valley of dry bones, short of technology that they did not have at the time there would be no way even to tell who these people were. The memories of these people and their lives had long since faded into oblivion. Their stories were as dead and gone as they were. There was nothing left. Not even the faintest glimmer of hope. Just a

valley filled with the shadow of death – scars on the landscape that suggested that sometime, long, long ago, something had gone really wrong and a bunch of people had died.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” God asks Ezekiel. A question so preposterous it was almost laughable.

But nevertheless, God breathes his Spirit into them, and all of a sudden the bones start to rattle. To shake. To rumble. Clickity clackity clickety clackety they go, as the scattered bones start to organize themselves, coming together, re-attaching themselves into full human skeletons. And then, cartilage re-forms. Tendons. Ligaments. Connective tissues. Muscles form. Vital organs. Skin. Even hairs numbered upon their heads, one-by-one-by-one.

This word that we have for God breathing: *naphach* in Hebrew and *emphusao* in Greek, is the same word that we have used in Genesis 2:7 when God breathes into Adam’s nostrils the *ruach* – the breath of life, the very Spirit of God, and again in John 20:22, after Jesus has returned he breathes upon the disciples and says “receive the Holy Spirit.”

“You feel like there is nothing left?” God is asking the exiles. “You feel like you are just a skeleton of what used to be? Are you feeling alone and cut off, abandoned, like bones scattered in a big valley?”

“Are you constantly looking backwards at what used to be? The days when these bones walked the earth as full human beings? The days when kings ruled well and worship in the temple was vital and vibrant? Back to the days when the pews were full and when politics made sense and when a virus wasn’t killing hundreds of thousands of people and when the Taliban wasn’t taking over Afghanistan and when young families weren’t having to work 2 and 3 and 4 jobs just to make their rent payments and when the country of Haiti wasn’t reeling – again – in the aftermath of yet another natural disaster?”

Do you find yourself nostalgically looking back to the days when Sunday church was the norm, and you knew all of your neighbors, and people weren’t glued constantly to a screen?

Have you begun to lose hope, that these bones can ever live again?

Mortal. Ezekiel. People of Judah. Bendersville Church. Wenksville Church. United Methodist Church. Can these bones live?

If we were to be totally and completely honest, based on conversations that I have had with more than a few of you – most of us probably have our doubts. We know, and we lament (along with the Psalmist) that things are not going to go back to what they were

60, or 30, or 10, or even 2 years ago. Judah did not go back to the same Jerusalem they left. Life was never the same for them.

But that does not mean that the bones didn't live.

All that is necessary for our dry, dusty bones to come to life, is for the Spirit of God to show up.

The Spirit of God who spins a human out of dust and then breathes life into that human. The Spirit of God who shows up when Jesus breathes into the messy and deflated and defeated disciples and transforms them into apostles – the very people on whose witness the church would be built. The Spirit of God who takes a deep breath and makes dry bones begin to rattle and come together as a vast army – this Spirit of God is all about taking us from a place of lament; a place of doubt; a place of hopelessness and turning that into something brand new.

What that something looks like, we have no idea. How that something will be manifest, God only knows. What life is going to look like in the meantime, well...I pray that we will come to see moments of beauty and little glimpses of the kingdom of God amidst the chaos and the turmoil and the fear and the uncertainty.

But what we do know is that we have a God who does not play by the rules. We have a God who looks at our places of brokenness, and quarreling, and sickness, and disease, and war, and terror, and earthquakes and floods and fires – who looks at our bones that are so numerous and so scattered that we can't make heads or tails of a single one of them. A God who looks at us, when we are crying out along with the Psalmist "O God, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror," and says "My child, these bones will live."

So my friends, though we may be tired; though we may feel hopeless; though we may be going life afraid some days, may we always keep our ears open, listening for the rattling of dry bones; for the signs of life that God is even now breathing into our midst. And may we take a step of faith, affirming that yes. By the power of God and through the breath of the Spirit, these bones *can*, in fact, live.