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Ezekiel 37:1-14  
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## **The Walking Dead**

The setting is in the midst of a fifty-year exile in Babylonia.

It's been 1400 years since Abraham almost sacrificed his son Isaac on an altar. 800 years since Moses crossed the Red Sea. 400 years since King David became the great warrior king of the Jewish nation.

And now, 400 years later, they are not doing so well. The Jews have drifted very far from the faith of their grandparents. Very far from the faith of Abraham, Moses, and David.

Their kings have been lousy. Their armies have done even worse. And the faith of the people is thin.

That is true exile. Trapped. Prisoners. Pretty much slaves to the great armies of Babylon. Quite a humbling experience for God's chosen people.

The thing is, they never really acted very chosen. I mean, how many chances do you give a chosen people to wise up?

After a long siege and fierce fighting, Jerusalem has been overcome by Babylonian troops under King Nebuchadnezzar.

Its city walls were nothing but rubble. The magnificent temple was in ruins. Its leading citizens had been taken captive 500 miles away.

And, it is under this backdrop that one of the most visionary prophets of the Old Testament shows up. His name is Ezekiel and he has a message for the exiled people.

There the hand of the Lord was upon him to proclaim hope in a time of hopelessness.

Ezekiel's most remembered vision is the one Paul and I just read. It is the vision of the dry bones.

I really can't imagine a more thankless pastorate than Ezekiel's graveyard.

If you thought a Presbyterian congregation was quiet during a sermon, imagine making a joke to pews of femurs and metatarsals.

No smiles of understanding, no lips even; the slightest nods of agreement could lead to their heads falling off.

Ezekiel's congregation didn't just have some folks dozing off, the Bible says there was literally no life in them.

He was preaching to sun bleached skeletons and faded headstones with moss and weeds growing on them.

This scene Ezekiel describes is the desolate plain where the Israelite refugees were settled... a place where battles had been fought; a place of death and devastation.

Here in this place hopes were dashed, life was helpless despair, energy was dried up.

It seemed as if even God had abandoned God's own people.

It was a tragic scene.

But the prophet Ezekiel had this vision. In his vision he sat in the middle of a valley where there was nothing but old dried-up skeletons.

Bones were everywhere. It was a scene of total desolation and despair. A valley of dry bones.

You might have heard the saying, "The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's fear." That's true but I'd like to add another one: "The opposite of faith is not doubt, it's hopelessness."

Hopelessness leads to an atheism which says, "There is no God with us here. We are just dried up bones. There is no God."

More tragic, hopelessness can lead to apathetic agnosticism, "Who cares? Who cares about God anyway? It just is what it is. *C'est la vie.*"

This is the spiral of despair facing Israel and so God brings the edgiest, most crass, most authentic preacher / prophet / pastor to them.

And his biggest challenge is to cast a bold, imaginative vision of hope which springs from their very real pain.

Amidst this scene of death, decay and destruction, the Lord asks Ezekiel a powerful question--a question that is important to your life and mine, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I was reading recently a story coming out of the Social Security Administration.

It seems that of the 2.8 million deaths reported to the Social Security Administration last year, approximately 14,000 people's names were incorrectly entered in their online database as dead.

That many people, 1 out of 200 entries, were reported as dead when they were very much alive and well. That's 38 life-altering mistakes every day.

One day, Laura Brooks, a 52-year-old mother of two, suddenly stopped receiving disability checks.

Then, her loan payments and rent checks bounced. She went to the bank to find out what was the matter, and the representative told her that her accounts had been closed because she was dead.

They would only reopen her accounts if she could prove she was alive.

It would be a shock to most of us if one day our bank declared that we were dead and refused to honor our checks. That would be most inconvenient.

But, there are many individuals who are dead. Not physically dead, but spiritually dead, emotionally dead, relationally dead, people on whom their families and friends and society in general have given up on.

They are living in the valley of dry bones.

Have you ever been in the valley of dry bones? Some of you have. You've been in the midst of a bad marriage.

One day you woke up and all around you were dead bones where a loving relationship had once been.

There had been happier times, times when you thought this marriage was made in Heaven. But now it's closer to Hell. Dry bones.

Some of you go to work . . . and you're surrounded by dry bones. Your job certainly doesn't match up to the dreams and aspirations of your youth. Dry bones.

Or it happens when you ponder your health or your relationship with your kids. Just a few years ago, life seemed so promising.

But one by one your dreams have died. Now you sit there surrounded by those bones. And you do not know what to do.

For many of us, it happens as we age. The pundits are right . . . aging is not for sissies. Your strength falters. You spend an inordinate time waiting in doctor's offices. Dry bones.

Or perhaps you're caring for an aging parent. You tell yourself you don't mind, not really.

After all, you love your Mom, you love your Dad, but the stress never lets up. And it's beginning to affect your health and well-being. Dry bones.

Ezekiel looked around at all those dry bones, the walking dead, and he understood that those bones represented his people, the people of Israel, scattered and without hope.

He knew that only a miracle could bring together his people again and restore them with vitality and purpose. Only a miracle would make his people live again.

And God tells Ezekiel to call for the spirit to blow through the bones and give them life.

Did you know that the word for wind, the word for breath, and the word for Spirit in the Bible is all one word. It's *ruach* in the Old Testament, *pneuma* in the New Testament.

In our text, *ruach* pops up a full 10 times in these 14 verses.

I know, we ask meteorologists to predict the wind, physicians to help us breathe, and theologians to send us the Spirit.

But, the Bible makes no such divisions. The same Spirit that caused Adam to be a living being is the Holy Spirit that comes with wind and fire at Pentecost to give new life.

I talk with a fair number of people who have lost contact with God. I understand that. But God is closer than we think.

When you think you've lost God, this is what I want to say. Breathe. You have to anyway. Take a breath. Take a deep breath. God is closer than the air we breathe.

I was in the grocery store the other day when I watched a two-year-old throw a temper tantrum.

Something between the Cheerios and the Frosted Flakes made him unhappy. He screamed to the top of his voice.

When that didn't work, he decided to stop breathing. His face turned red. His lips turned blue. I wondered what to do.

His mom, however, seemed unconcerned. She knew he would eventually breathe — and he did.

I've thrown my fair share of temper tantrums with God — decided in anger or grief to stop breathing spiritually.

When God didn't respond with a siren and paramedics, I concluded He was not there.

But like that mother, He is there all the time. He said, "You'll breathe again at the right time, in the right way." God is closer than the air we breathe.

Here's something else about breath. Most of us use only about 20—30% of our lung capacity.

We are shallow breathers. We breathe on the surface, not from the depths of our being. That's why we are short of breath so much.

The same is true spiritually. We dabble around on the surface. A real spiritual person is a person who knows how to breathe. Breathe on me breath of God.

The philosopher Kierkegaard used to pray it this way: "Teach me, O God, not to torture myself, not to make a martyr of myself through stifling reflection, but rather teach me to breathe deeply in faith."

God is breathing fresh air into our lives even now. God is reviving that which was dry and dead: dead hope, dead faith, dead community, dead lives.

God breathes *ruach* and suddenly, "Look, those bones, they're moving" ... moving with new life, new hope, and new energy.

That is God's promise to you, to the church, and to all dry bones: "I will put my spirit in you and you shall live."

A breath of fresh air from the Lord does indeed give new life to a spiritually, emotionally, physically, and relationally drained and dry people.

God's exiled people were so dried up that they couldn't see anything but devastation and couldn't feel anything but isolation. They needed Ezekiel to open their eyes and to help them feel the wind of the spirit as the Lord was breathing new life into their souls.

Pentecost is also about the experience of experiencing the assurance of God's grace with our hearts, not just our heads.



It's about believing that we are loved so much by God that God would find a way to be with us all the time, and give us what we need to weather any storm the world might throw at us.

Pentecost is about experiencing in our hearts the belief that dry bones can indeed live, that human hopelessness can indeed be transformed into hope...

... that mountains can indeed be moved, that someday all the world will most certainly know what it feels like to live and love in peace.

When we get down to it, Pentecost is about something very "un-Presbyterian," it's about ... feeling .... it's about ... emotion!

It's about being vulnerable enough that we might dare risk letting go and letting the Spirit blow through our lives.

No one knows where the wind comes from, or when it will come up, or what direction it will blow in.

The wind cannot be controlled, and that's exactly what scares us. The wind can only be experienced.

And Pentecost is God's call to experience the power of his love and the assurance of his grace...not just with our heads, but with our hearts.

Pentecost is the gift of God's Spirit that frees us to celebrate the love of God and the fire of hope that burns within our hearts.

So, the Good News, this Pentecost morning, to a bunch cerebral-Presbyterians is this:

Stop thinking so much and risk feeling the faith with your heart! I confess I am preaching to myself here!

Come to realize that the truth of some of life's most fundamental questions cannot be discovered in our heads, but can only be experienced in our hearts.

"Can these dry bones live?"

The answer is "Yes, they can," as long as our hearts are open and we allow ourselves to feel the rush of the wind kissing our hearts.

May it be so with each one of us on this Pentecost morning. And then every day thereafter!

*Amen.*