

**I WILL PUT MY SPIRIT WITHIN YOU, AND YOU SHALL LIVE**  
**EZEKIEL 37: 1-14; ROMANS 8: 6-11**  
**FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT**  
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**Ezekiel 37: 1-14**

*37 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. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. 5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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." 7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11 Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12 Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.*

Both of our scripture passages this morning are rich with imagery and metaphors. Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming back to life gave hope to the Israelites in exile. Perhaps they would have a life of purpose and meaning again, though the odds were against it.

In his Letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul talks of new life, too. Paul said Christians are given new life in the Spirit. The same Spirit that breathed life into dry bones breathes life into the followers of Christ. No longer do we have to live as others do in society, which Paul describes as life in the flesh.

The Apostle Paul suggests that we have a choice. To live by the flesh is to choose death. If we live by the Spirit of Christ which is in us, we live as children of God and heirs of the Kingdom. Let us listen closely to the Word of God to you and to me this morning from the Letter to the Romans 8: 6-11. It is a matter of life and death.

**Romans 8: 6-11**

*6 To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. 7 For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law--indeed it cannot, 8 and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. 9 But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. 10 But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. 11 If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you. 12 So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of*

*God are children of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ--if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

I loved hearing Gabriel's Sounds sing, "Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones, Now Hear the Word of the Lord." There is something about the Word sung that speaks to the Spirit deep within us.

The slaves who first sang the spiritual knew about dry bones. They worked hard, and life often seemed without purpose or meaning. Their bodies and bones were bought, sold and discarded as if they were of no value. The slaves in America identified with the Israelites who were taken into Babylonian exile. They lost hope. They saw no way to go home again. Some days the African slaves and the Babylonian exiles felt like dry bones.

In Ezekiel's time, bones became dry because they were not treated with respect. The bones were picked over by birds and other predators because no one buried them properly. Ezekiel presented a vivid picture of the desecration of life.

Several years ago my son and I visited Dachau, one of the German concentration camps. The ovens, the gas chambers, and the rooms where people slept like animals in a cage still make me sick when I think about them. How can we treat human beings or any living creature like that? How can we treat people like dry bones? Yet it continues today. We see it in Darfur, Kenya and elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa.

The desecration of life occurs right here in Georgetown, often behind closed doors. People are abused and neglected. People lose hope. Some people feel like dry bones.

We may feel like dry bones even when our lives look pretty good to outsiders. The Apostle Paul described this kind of dry bone life as life in the flesh. We see it in people who are busy with school, work or whatever they do each day, but they lack a sense of purpose or direction. We see it in people suffering from addictions. We see it wherever there is despair.

Christians are not immune to the dry bone life. We are constantly tempted to live in the flesh in order to be successful or popular. It happened to Roman Christians in the first century, and it happens to American Christians today.

We feel like dried bones for a variety of reasons. Some of us are in exile. We move to a new location, but the new place is not "home." Our new house, church, school, job or relationship is not what we hoped. Exile can be difficult and painful. Most of us can never go home again because home is in a past that no longer exists.

Death, illness or financial difficulties may send us into exile. There may be chemical or psychological conditions that contribute to feelings of despair. It is good stewardship to seek treatment for the mind and body God has given us, but we also need spiritual healing. During Lent we remember the sacrifice Jesus made so that we have the option of new life, even when the odds are stacked against us. We have a choice.

God brings life to dried bones. There is hope. Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Weisel believes that Ezekiel's vision of dried bones bears no date for a reason: "Every generation needs to hear in its own time that these bones can live again" (Wiesel, "Ezekiel," in Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Bible, ed. Rosenburg, 1987, p. 186). Maybe some of us need to hear it today. Wiesel was angry at God for

50 years, but he stayed in conversation. Wiesel said he finally realized how much the Holocaust must have grieved God. Wiesel's dry bones came alive.

God cares. One of the ways this congregation serves as the body of Christ is by sharing God's love, especially when people feel like dried bones. The Spirit works through us and within us to bring new life.

The existence of this church testifies to the work of the Holy Spirit. God made this body of Christ out of unrelated bones. Some of our bones were dry when we first came to San Gabriel. God brought us together and breathed purpose and meaning into our connectedness.

God is still breathing new life into this congregation. New bones arrive every week. Many of us are surprised at what we experience here. We find joy and purpose; but it is God's purpose that unfolds. *I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live*, says the Lord.

This is true for us as a church, and it is true for us as individuals. Pastors are blessed because we hear stories of new life. I am amazed at the ways God works through our trials and through our pain to bring joy and blessing. According to the Apostle Paul, when we suffer in Christ – when we stay close to Christ and endure what comes our way, we will be glorified with Christ. I have seen miracles occur, but they are not necessarily miracles of physical healing. Often they are miracles of spiritual healing. The Good News of the cross and the Good News of dried bones is that God brings life out of death.

My friends, if we are not really living right now, we need to hold on and listen up. We need to hear the Word of the Lord. Maybe we need to sing it. Maybe we need to receive it deep inside. Maybe we need a hug.

Some of our women knit prayer shawls not knowing who will receive them. They pray the entire time they knit. If you want to feel God's love in a tangible way, try wrapping up in one of our prayer shawls. There are shawls available, just like God's love is available. We only need to ask. Some of us already have a shawl, but maybe we need to wrap it around us again this afternoon and feel God's love.

Some of us may feel like dried bones because we are not serving the Lord in our lives right now. We may be busy. The Babylonian exiles were busy. They worked hard, but they felt like dried bones. If our days are dry and lifeless, hear the Word of the Lord. God gives life through the Spirit. Life may come in the Spirit's whisper to serve.

If the Spirit has called you to this body of Christ, there is a reason. What is it that God wants you to do for Christ or to be in Christ? It might be as simple as offering love through a cup of coffee or through a smile. It may be as complex as developing a choir or some other ministry in the church. Maybe God wants us to join a mission trip this summer or care for a flower bed at the church. Perhaps God wants us to offer financial resources.

Ezekiel and Paul used images to communicate God's Word. What images resonate for us this morning? One of the latest trends in corporate recruitment and staff development is the creation of images built with Legos (Homiletics, March 9, 2008). According to an Economist article, PricewaterhouseCoopers asks their job candidates to create a tower with Legos. Google has applicants build the strongest bridge they can. In one team building workshop, employees are given a bag of Legos and asked to create an image of their company: what they believe their company is or should be. What would we build to describe our lives? What would we build to describe our family's life? What would we build to describe this church?

When our capital fund campaign committee was asked to create a logo, they chose the image you see on your bulletin. They believe God wants us to build a bridge to our future.

The idea of a bridge was based on a book titled The Irresistible Church. The book was first studied by the Saturday morning men's group and later by a larger mission and outreach class. The author encourages Christians to build bridges into the community that make their church irresistible.

After moving into this beautiful building, some of us wanted to get right to work setting up new service ministries. We were excited. We have all sorts of ideas from our previous churches, from books we have read, and from the opportunities and needs we see in this community. When the capital fund committee, the session and the vision process team gathered for reflection, they heard a different Word from God. That Word was Jeremiah 29:11. They are convinced that God has plans for us, but right now they believe God wants us to build the financial infrastructure to make those plans possible.

The capital funds team considered different bridges – big bridges, little bridges, bridges of steel, stone and wood. The team decided the bridge on the logo fits San Gabriel best. It is a modest but sturdy bridge. The logo invites us onto the bridge. This is not a bridge to view from afar, as we would a painting. If we want a congregation where we can sit on the sidelines, we have come to the wrong place. At San Gabriel we cross the bridge to God's future together. We are young and not so young. Some of us are rich, and some are poor. Some of us cannot come to church anymore, but we will still move forward together.

The only thing we know for sure about our future is the cross of Jesus Christ. We have lots of ideas about our future. A vision process team has been working for months just organizing a way we might discern God's vision for what this church might be and do for the Lord in the next few years.

When I came to San Gabriel over eight years ago, there were fourteen petitioners. Tom Barber was 80 years old at the time. He had just retired from an oil company. Tom told me stories about flying on a private jet to interview pastor candidates for Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church in Houston. At 80 years old, Tom was called to build a new church for Jesus Christ, and he loved every minute of it. Tom wrote what he described as our church history according to the Spirit. Tom was alive in the Spirit.

We are blessed as a church because we are led by a Spirit. Too many impossible things have happened for us to take the credit. What is true for this church is true for us as individuals. God has plans for us, and those plans are for our good. God gives hope especially to dry bones and to those hanging on a cross of suffering. There is new life. God gives us a future of hope. We are children of God, heirs of the kingdom. *I will put my spirit within you*, says the Lord, *and you shall live*. May we choose life today. Amen.