

March 26, 2023  
Romans 8:6-11  
Ezekiel 37:1-14

## Breathing New Life into Dry Bones

The people of Israel have spoken: “Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.” These are people who feel abandoned. People who feel that God’s promises have been broken. Because they are in Babylon. In exile. Far from home. They feel as hopeless and lifeless as a pile of bones.

The people of Israel were not in Israel anymore. They had been taken captive by the Babylonians. Around the year 586 BCE, their armies arrived in Jerusalem and attacked the city. They overthrew the king, destroyed the Temple, kidnapped all of the nobles, leaders, and priests and took them back to their country, hundreds and hundreds of miles away. The people were held captive in this foreign place with foreign languages and foreign gods. They were now subjects of their empire. They were being indoctrinated with Babylonian culture. Their children went to Babylonian schools and then had Babylonian jobs. The people of Israel had never felt so defeated. Everything they once had was gone.

“Our bones are dried up,” they cried out. “Our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.” God’s people don’t feel like God’s people anymore. And why should they? All of God’s promises God had been broken. God’s promise of a land all their own: gone. God’s promise of a Kingdom that would stand forever: gone. God’s promise to be with them and dwell with them in the Temple at Jerusalem: gone. Everything God has given the Babylonians had taken away. Now, they were nowhere with nothing.

Maybe you know what it’s like to lose everything like the people of God. Maybe you know what it’s like to have your whole identity taken away. Maybe it was the loss of a career. The loss of your health. Maybe you have to move suddenly and start over in a new place. Maybe there was a fire, or a flood, or a threat of violence. Maybe you had to leave the community you loved because it just didn’t feel like home anymore. And you didn’t fit in. You weren’t welcome. All the promises, all the blessings you had disappeared. And now you are in a strange place. And you don’t know who you are anymore. You don’t know what to put your faith in or where to find hope.

The people of Israel felt lost. They felt God had deserted them. God had broken the promises God made to them. They feel exiled and abandoned. I hear these words from God's people in churches all around us, Christians who feel like God has left us. Things aren't what they used to be. Fewer people come to church. Children grow up and don't come back. COVID made it worse. Churches in our own area are selling buildings and cutting staff. They feel like God has broken promises to them: promises that they would be a big successful church in a big successful nation. That things would always be good and they would always be on top. But that dream failed. And now there is disappointment, anger, and despair. The rage of the powerful who aren't powerful anymore. Why did this happen to us? Where is God? What about all the promises God made? What about our land, our king and our temple that should be ours?

Ultimately it was God who had let the people down. In our story from Ezekiel, God's people were lost and cut off in Babylon. And God had done nothing to prevent it. God had not stopped it from happening. And

now they were in exile and they were nobody's people. Their bones were dried up. Their hope was lost. Their time as God's people was at an end. They cry out with their last breath. Maybe God can still hear them. Maybe there is still hope that God will listen like God did when they were slaves in Egypt. Maybe God can hear them in Babylon too. The prophet Ezekiel brings the people a word from the Lord. The Lord does hear them and the Lord has a message. It is a vision of a valley of dry bones. Bones upon bones, brittle, bleaching in the sun. Bones as far as the eye can see. God asks Ezekiel: Can these dry bones live again? It is a question for the people of God. It is a question for us. Can what is dead come back to life? Can what is over and done with begin again? It seems completely impossible. The people of Israel are too far gone. The sinews and flesh that held them together are no longer there. The land, the temple, the line of kings. How can bones live when there is no body and no spirit within? But God is about to do something new. Something God couldn't do before. Because sometimes you have to hit rock bottom before you can turn around. You have to admit you are powerless and come to the end of it all, to find the beginning again.

And the old idea of what defined the people of God has died. The power and possession and control of it all. It died when the Babylonian armies erased it. But speak to the bones, God says. Tell them: ‘You shall live. It’s not over. I will lay sinews on you, and flesh, and skin, and I will put breath in you, and you shall live. And you shall know that I AM the LORD.’ You are still mine. I am still yours. You will live again. You will have spirit and life and hope. You will trust that I am your God and you are my people.”

God will put them back together. God will join the bones and regrow the sinews and muscles and skin. And God will breathe the Spirit into them again. God’s own breath—the ruach—it is creation all over again. God will bring the people to life right there in that place of death, in Babylon. They will know even in exile that God is with them. And God isn’t only present in a certain land or a certain building or a certain leader. The breath of God’s spirit is in them. And God is with them wherever they are breathing. Wherever there is air. God will be God and they will be God’s people.

The people of Israel were used to God being in their kingdom and their temple. And we think of God that way too. WE are God's people and God is OUR God. We are the chosen, ruling in the promised land of our country. God has given us possession and power of this Christian nation. But the time for all of that has come to an end. It's time for us to remember that Jesus did not build an empire. He did not rule from a throne, but from a cross. He didn't want popularity or success, he wanted faithfulness. At the end of his life, he was despised and rejected and utterly defeated. And all he could do was give his last breath to God. Why do we think that things will be different for us? Why are we, the church, afraid of death? The end must come for the beginning to happen. And these bones can live again.

For there to be a beginning, there must be an ending. And this is the paradox of faith. We must lose it all to find it all. We must let it go to receive it. We must die in order to be resurrected. We must give up our control and our possession and our power in this world, so we can know the power of God. When we exhale our last breath, (sigh) there is room for God's breath to fill us once again. "I will make these dry bones live,

“ God says. “I will put you back together. I will breathe my spirit into you. And you will know that I am the Lord.”

When it's the end, pay attention. When hope is lost for us, pay attention because God is about to do something impossible. Something we know could only be the work of God. Let me tell you about one of the Presbyterian churches in our area. It's very small and has struggled to stay open. The cost of running things keeps growing and their group keeps shrinking. They feel like dry, old bones. One Sunday a family showed up with a little girl who had severe autism. She would shout and make noise during church and shout and move around. But the little congregation didn't mind. They were just glad they were there. They accepted this family and embraced the little girl. Congregation members took turns sitting with her and doing activities with her. Her mother was touched. She said: “This is the first church that has really welcomed us.” She invited other families. And all of a sudden, the church found they had new life and purpose. They were a church that welcomed children with autism and they were advocates for neurodiverse kids.

A few years ago, another church in Nicholasville was failing. They did everything they could to keep going. They sold their building. They hired a funky new pastor. They moved to a storefront. But nothing worked. The life of this church had come to an end. So they put their remaining funds into an endowment for a future church, one that would minister to the needs of the community. And after years of planning and building, a new church has been born. It's called Urban Village and it opens this month. It is a gym, and it focuses on martial arts. The director is the pastor and he is making connections to at-risk teens and hosting addiction recovery groups. It is a place for people lost or in exile.

The people of God are meant to be alive. Even if it means letting go. Even if it means surrendering who we were. Even if it means dying, we die to ourselves so we can live again in Christ. Because his way is the way of death and resurrection. And in him, these bones can live again. For our breathing meditation today, I ask you to sit comfortably. Close your eyes. Bring your attention to your breathing. As you breathe in, breath in God's mercy and as you breathe out, breathe out God's grace. Every breath is filled with the Spirit. Every breath we take is God with



us. Every breath is possibility, and potential, and new creation. And what will happen next? Only God knows. As you breathe in, fill up your lungs with the fullness of God. As you breathe out, breathe out release it entirely. Let it go. Audibly like a sigh. As you let go of the breath, let go of control of the breath, possession of the breath, power over the breath. Release it and entrust it to God. Imagine this as the end of yourself. Imagine this as the last breath that you give back to God. And as the next breath comes, let it be a new breath of new life. This is starting over. This is your resurrection. This is spirit and life given to us so that we may be God's people and God may be our God. So what will we do with this new breath? What might the Spirit of God do among us? What might be possible? And how will these bones live again?