

Sermon: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Lent 5A)  
Christ Church Riverdale, 10 April 2011  
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**Ezekiel 37:1-14** 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. <sup>2</sup>He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>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.” <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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.” <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. <sup>11</sup>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.’ <sup>12</sup>Therefore prophesy, 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. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>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.

This is one of the most powerful and vivid stories in the whole Bible—a valley full of dried out bones coming together with a great clatter and being rebuilt into bodies, then being brought back to life. When we dig deeper we only discover more power. Ezekiel is writing at a time when Judah has been conquered by the Babylonians. He and the other leading citizens have been carried off in exile and the Temple has been destroyed. For a people whose identity is closely bound up with the land and whose God dwells in the Jerusalem Temple, not only is this a military defeat, but a powerful threat to their very identity and existence. No wonder they’re lamenting: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” It’s against this back story that Ezekiel has a vision of God taking him to a valley full of dry bones. It’s the image of a battlefield where there’s been a terrible slaughter--dead piled on dead. The dead on the losing side are subject to the final indignity, because their bodies aren’t even given a proper burial but are left for scavengers to pick their bones clean!

When God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” the answer is obvious: “There’s no way! Are you kidding?” Yet God says, “Prophesy to these bones.” Not, “Watch me bring these bones back to life so that you can prophesy to them,” but “Prophesy to these dead, dry scattered bones.” And we see the bones reunite as skeletons, receive sinews, flesh and skin. But the process isn’t done yet, since what are now bodies don’t have life--don’t have breath--until

Ezekiel obeys God's commandment to prophesy to the breath to enter the bodies and make them live. "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel," God tells Ezekiel, if the connection weren't explicit enough. The exiled people of Judah who have lost their land and God's Temple think of themselves as good as dead. Yet God promises to bring them back to the land of Israel back out of the graves that they don't just have one foot in but already feel buried in!

In the most hopeless of situations, when all around is death, God brings life. And the way God does it teaches us some important things about the life of faith today. God doesn't let Ezekiel watch while the bones come to life, but says, "You do it—prophesy to the bones." The way God brings them to life is not all at once but gradually—first reassembling the skeletons then adding the sinews, then the flesh and skin. Finally, as with Adam, life is breathed into the bodies. Looking out over the valley, in the place of piles of dry bones Ezekiel now sees a vast army. Out of powerlessness and defeat has come the greatest expression of power known in that day.

Now you and I don't often hear people lamenting, "Our bones are dried up," but the sense of hopelessness and alienation felt by the exiles from Judah is no stranger to our times. Maybe we're too sophisticated to cry, "our hope is lost," and instead hide our pain by pretending not to care so much: "Whatever!" . . . "What're you gonna do?" . . . "It is what it is." And so we become more cynical and let political posturing rule the day when it comes to the education of our children. And so we notice a decline in civic and volunteer participation but ignore how trends are made up of individual decisions.

Coming back to life even by God's power is a process—it takes patience. Who knows how long we have to look stupid enough to prophesy to a pile of dead bones before they even start the process of coming back together, much less getting the sinews, flesh and skin that makes them bodies still needing life to be breathed into them. Maybe we spend all of our time and effort prophesying to dead bones, and the rebuilding of bodies doesn't come until later, with somebody else getting the credit! Maybe we see sinews and flesh being restored, but don't make it to the stage of skin and breath. Maybe we live in a world that likes the way lifeless bodies don't rock the boat, and so doesn't want us to call breath back into them. In your own lives, your own work, your own relationships, I'm guessing there are some piles of bones given up for dead. But if there's one thing we can learn from Ezekiel today, it's that in God's eyes, there's no giving up for dead!