

Can these bones live?
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11
April 10, 2011

“God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. [God] led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun. [The Lord] said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “God, only you know that.” (Ez. 37:1-3) **The setting for today’s reading from Ezekiel is Israel in exile.** The Israelite people had been conquered by the Babylonians and were forced from their homes into an alien land with foreign gods and a culture that was also foreign to them. Their city was decimated and their holy temple, the place where God lived for them, was destroyed. The people became hopeless and despondent. As a people, they had lost all faith and had become, emotionally and spiritually, dried bones. For them God could live no place other than their holy temple and in their holy land, God **was not alive in them or for them any longer.** The book of Ezekiel as a whole deals with issues of communal identity and meaning.

As you look around your community and upon the faces of people around you today, what do you see? Is there hope or is there despair? When you listen to the discussions in the coffee shop or around the water cooler, is there any mention of God in the world today or is it purely talk of human agency? Can these bones live? That is the question that God **asks us today, just as God asked Ezekiel.** **While our text tells** us that Ezekiel responded, “O, Lord, God you know,” (37:3) one can imagine what he must have been thinking but dared not say. He was probably thinking, “You’re kidding right, these people are dead to themselves,” but he was smart enough not to say anything like that to God. There was no self-reliance or human agency in his response. Ezekiel knew that, if it were possible, only God could bring life to dry bones. In faith he opened himself to the possibilities found in God.

Can these bones live? Ezekiel is then **told by the Lord to preach to the dry bones, to the people** who have given up hope and lost their faith, before him and the Lord tells him what to say: *“Prophesy 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: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.⁶ I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.”* (Ez. 37) God wants these dry bones, these hopeless and faithless people, to walk again in covenant with their Creator. God uses a human being, Ezekiel, to speak the life giving words to the people of Judah. It is God, in us, who helps to bring hope to the hopeless and comfort to the afflicted. God works through **us in the world. We are Gods hands, feet and voice.**

What words of hope has God spoken in your life for you to share with others in their time of need? What words of hope do you offer to folks when they ask you where is God in their struggle? **Can these bones live? Our economy seems to be** getting worse by the minute, the wealthy continue to use their influence and continue to get ahead while the poor get poorer, our politicians seemed to have stopped listening to us a long time ago, we have entered yet another war, there’s any number of natural disasters... there are dry bones all around us. As people of faith we are called to speak God’s word to the people in our everyday lives who need to hear **words of hope, words of compassion, and words of faith.** The stories we find in scripture, such as this one from Ezekiel and the one from Romans, help us to find hope in the midst of some of the most tragic of circumstances. The stories of our own lives and how we have overcome difficulties, thanks to God’s grace, serve as testimony as well, for those who are willing to hear. Sadly there are those who live in the land of “yeah, but,” “I hear you but,” “maybe that’s true but...” There is always a “but” for something. God’s words of hope go forward and are met with a brick wall. Some folks choose to remain in **their despair. Some choose to remain dry bones.**

Ezekiel “realized that no **matter how hard God may try to send forth God’s** Spirit upon these people, there would be some who would not want to live. Instead they would choose to remain dead complainers, rigid and inflexible, resistant to the Spirit’s work to bring life. . . . Ezekiel knew that there would be those who would choose lifelessness over growth.” (J. Lindsey) God has given us free will, and even for **those who choose lifelessness over growth, God** continues to reach out and to be present. To choose to walk in hope is to risk growing, to walk in hope is to shake the status quo for those who are comfortable in their misery. The modern day church remains a great example of wanting to remain the same. Many congregations still long for the days of the church as it was in 1950. Those days are gone. How many congregations continue to say, “Yeah, but we’ve never done it that way before,” “Yes but some of us don’t want to do all that church stuff, we just want to come to worship and go home,” or “**But that’s the Pastor’s job?**” **People of faith get comfortable with** the status quo. Much like the people of Judah, there is a resignation to one’s circumstance rather than standing on the promises of God and praying for God’s spirit to move among us, to stir our hearts, and to stir us to action, transforming us. Can our dry bones live today?

Ezekiel discovers and teaches us that it is the coming together of God’s word and God’s spirit, **God’s Ruah, that brings life and growth to our dry bones.** At the behest of God, he once again is told to prophecy to the dry bones which now have flesh upon them. He discovers that there still is no life in them, rather they remain flesh and sinew over bone. ⁸ *Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and **the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them.*** ⁹ *Also [God] said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”’¹⁰ So I prophesied as [the Lord] commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived...”* (Ez. 37) “The words of the prophet can get the people and the restoration only so far. Essential to the recovery of these dry bones **is the spirit of God. It is the very breath of God (the Ruah) that makes a**

difference in the life and death of the community. The very essence of God in the breath of the Spirit is not to **be ignored. The filling of the Spirit is essential to new** life for these people and for the life of these bones. ” (K. Thompson) Again, we have God acting through a human being speaking in ordinary human language, the word of the Lord, speaking life in the Spirit. How is the breath of God, the Ruah, present in your life? **Is the breath of God present in the life of Peace UCC** or are you dry bones?

The Spirit, the Ruah, the breath of God is present from the four winds for us as a community, just as it was for the Israelite people. The Spirit is there not merely to meet our individual needs, but to help us as a people, as a community to grow in faith, to stand in hope, **and to continue to vision new possibilities, new ways of** thinking, and new ways of being present with God. Transformation and change take place in the presence of the Spirit. The Spirit is in us and in our community waiting to be awakened through prayer, through our speaking the words, “stir within us and **among us breath of God.”** The late Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us: *“The Christian needs to be alone during a definite period of each day for meditation on scripture...and for prayer...even during times of spiritual dryness and apathy. It matters little what form of prayer we adopt...or how many words we use.”* It is both God’s word and God’s Spirit coming together which gives us life and helps us to grow.

“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” (Rm. 8:6) **Seek God’s Spirit and spend time with God in prayer, in** scripture, and in community with one another. God works through our hands, feet and voice offering comfort and hope in the midst of our greatest despair. Can these bones **live? Yes! We can live because of the Spirit of God** which lives within us and moves around us calling us to life! Amen.