

“Abundant Living Between the Steps”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur (Disciples of Christ), Georgia

5th Sunday in the Season of Lent, April 6, 2014

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Holy Scriptures: Ezekiel 37: 1-14 John 11: 17-27

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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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."

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. 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. Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 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.' 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. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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.

John 11: 17-27

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him,

"I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

[God] said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

This past Monday morning our Wisdom Weavers group of seniors and senior-wannabes

commandeered four large vehicles for a road trip

to see the IMAX film "*Jerusalem*" at the Fernbank Museum.

We were equally moved by the documentary's visual tour

of the ancient city of Jerusalem,

with the film's storytelling through the eyes of a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian,

with Jerusalem's temples, mosques, and churches,

with the city's deep roots as an international center for

trade, culture, politics, war, peace, & monotheistic religions,

with its place in history and modernity.

Afterward we talked over lunch at Mary Mac's Tea Room

sharing how fantastic it is that people from such divergent cultures and faiths

can live and work, worship and play in such close proximity,

and we also shared our wonderment

that people with so much in common

– one God, one city, one love for pot luck meals –

have such difficulty communicating with and caring for each other.

I was reminded of when a group from our congregation

visited the Carter Museum and Presidential Library.

We included in our circle that day people from the USA and Soviet Union.

We may have come from different cultures and time zones

on this blue planet spinning in the sky,

yet we were equally moved by the same quote

from President Jimmy Carter's speech

when he accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in 2002.

Each of us paused and pondered President Carter's words:

Ladies and gentlemen:

War may sometimes be a necessary evil.

But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good.

We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children.

The bond of our common humanity is stronger

than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices.

God gives us the capacity for choice.

We can choose to alleviate suffering.

We can choose to work together for peace.

We can make changes –

and we must.

[God] said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Can you imagine that a similar thought was flowing through Ezekiel's mind
when he stood in the valley of dry bones?

Ezekiel and his beloved family and neighbors from Israel are in exile,
displaced from their homes and far from all they held near and dear.

The year is 598 BCE.

Their lives are in turmoil;
they find more rapid change and loss
than they can comprehend or cope with or contemplate.

To make matters worse,
they are a spiritual people in a culture, a society, in surroundings
in which others are indifferent to religious matters of the heart.

God had promised them life,
life in all its glory,
life in its abundance and joy,
life in its fullest sense of the word.

Que pasa? What happened?

Jerusalem was attacked, the Temple destroyed,
citizens were driven away from their homes.

Now they find themselves seemingly dried up,
far from home,
far from their true sense of self,
far from feeling connected to the holy.

What do you go through when your life is turned upside down?

Where do you go?

To whom do you turn?

We've all been there.

Some of us may be there now.

Some of us may find ourselves there in days yet to come.

The truth, my friends, is that exiles cannot live apart from God.

No one can.

No one is an island.

There is no such thing as a self-made man or a self-made woman.

We cannot and need not live apart from the Holy Spirit.

God loves you, and wants you near.

And when we feel far off, it is God who draws near and envelops us.

When we find ourselves in exile,

God gives to us us the breath of life.

Like the first rays of light on a bright morning,

this thought began to dawn on Ezekiel.

He stood in a valley of dry bones

where he had a heart-to-heart conversation with the Lord.

He realized that the same Lord who was with them in Jerusalem

is with them in exile;

the same God of the Temple

is with them in the Diaspora.

the Holy One first heard about so long ago in the psalms and prayers of childhood

is present, God-with-us, Emmanuel

in times of alienation and isolation, in our meandering and mission.

George Bernard Shaw said, *“Some men die at 18 and are buried at 65.”*

Are you just going through the motions without any sense of movement?

Is there something that is missing in your life,

something that comes between you feeling fully alive and awake and aware?

Here is help.

Here is hope.

Here is the holy.

God said to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

Ezekiel answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”

The prophet defers the question back to God.

By avoiding the temptation to answer the question,

Ezekiel places the answer to the question where it should be,

and that is with God rather than with humanity.

Only God can sufficiently and satisfactorily address

our deepest questions and wondering and longings of the heart and mind.

Only God has the power and the promise to make life happen.

Only God can breathe new life into bones and make them to live again.

Only God has the will to open our graves

and bring us up into new life and purpose and meaning.

Only God.

God only has the power and promise to save.

God says to you, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

And the whole people of God respond, “O Lord God, you know.”

Whom has God sent into your life to breathe new life into your soul?

To whom do you need to be a life-giving presence?

You know that we stand in the valley of dry bones,

in the valley of life's challenges,

in the valley of doubt and faith,

in the valley of the shadow of death,

and that we shall fear no evil for Thou art with us.

Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort us.

And the breath of life shall sweep over God's people,

put sinew on dry bones and put new life in our souls.

The Lord said to Ezekiel,

"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."

God speaks to the dead, to the alienated, the addicted, the lost and the last and the least.

God will bring you back, bring you 'round, bring you in, bring you home.

Welcome home.

Welcome to your new life in Christ.

God has the grace and the power to give you new life, new beginnings, renewed purpose.

Receive the Holy Spirit!

Receive the Holy Spirit for the purpose which God intends!

[God] said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O Lord God, you know!"

Barbara Brown Taylor shares the story of a university professor
who was invited to speak at a military base in December.

There he met an unforgettable soldier named Ralph.

Ralph had been sent to meet him at the airport.

After they had introduced themselves,
they headed toward baggage claim.

As they walked down the concourse, Ralph kept disappearing.

Once to help an older woman whose suitcase had fallen open.

Once to lift two toddlers up so they could see Santa Claus.

Once to give someone directions who was lost.

Each time he came back with a smile on his face.

"Where did you learn that?" the professor asked.

"What?" Ralph said.

"Where did you learn to live like that?"

"Oh," Ralph said, *"during the war, I guess."*

He told about his tour of duty,
how his job was to clear mine fields,

how he watched friends blow up before his eyes, one after another.

"I learned to live between the steps," he said.

*"I never knew when the next step would be my last,
so I learned to get everything I could*

*out of the moment between when I picked up my foot
and when I put it down again.*

Every step I took was a whole new world, and I guess I've been that way ever since."

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

"O Lord God, you know!"

The abundance of our lives

is not determined by how long we live,
but by how well we live.

Do not deceive nor tempt yourself with a selfish thought.

This gift of new life is not for *me, myself and I*.

This gift is for the building up of the kingdom of God.

We stand together in the valleys of dry bones and lost souls,

looking to the hills from whence our help comes,

seeking wholeness in a fragmented world,

offering community to the broken

and belonging to the broken hearted.

"Mortal, can these bones –"

"O Lord God, you know!"

The Good News is that God calls to us to breathe the gift of life.

Breathe in the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Breathe out grace and peace.

Every breath precedes our behavior in this diverse and beautiful world.

God gives us the capacity for choice.

We can choose to alleviate suffering.

We can choose to work together for peace.

We can make changes – and we must.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!