

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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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." ⁷So 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then 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." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then 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.' ¹²Therefore 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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.

No Turning Back

A sermon preached by
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Text:
Ezekiel 37:1-14

March 29, 2009
Lent 5



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“Why be you, when you can be new?”

It’s the marketing slogan of the newly reorganized Bigweld Industries, the focus of the animated movie, *Robots*. The misguided mama’s boy turned dastardly corporate conniver, Ratchet, has unseated Mr. Bigweld and created a new focus for the previously welcoming and compassionate business which helped robots invent and rebuild. Now, Ratchet has declared that outmoded robots are to be scrapped and melted. Instead of repair, you can buy an entirely new chassis and become attractive, polished, and alluring. Rodney Copperbottom, the movie’s protagonist, fights the makeover movement and preaches what his father taught him from day one – “You can shine no matter what you’re made of.”

“Why be you when you can be new” versus “You can shine no matter what you’re made of.”

“Beneath all the clever clangery is a moral,” wrote Richard Corliss for *Time* magazine, “For a celebrity world that venerates tummy tucks, frozen faces and bosom enhancement – where the rich and famous strive for their own metallic solidity and sheen – *Robots* has an old-fashioned message: ‘You can shine no matter what you’re made of.’ In other words: Why be new when you can be the very best you? That’s a notion even humans can profit from.”

And, I might add, there’s not just a moral beneath the *Robots* script, but the message will also preach. When we live in a world that promotes a “why be you when you can be new?” mentality, where does that leave those of us who are dusty and rusty and unwilling to strap on just another new facade?

Here we are on the 5th Sunday in Lent, nearing the end of our 40-day wilderness journey. We started with the ashes of a Wednesday just a few weeks ago and have journeyed wherever God would take us. We have encountered in this wilderness temptations and trials as we search for a way out the other end

(Matthew 4: 1-11; Lent 1); we have been invited with Nicodemus to die to our old identity and be born into a new identity (John 3: 1-17; Lent 2); and we have had our blindness challenged and our call to receive the redemption and revelation renewed (John 9: 1-41; Lent 3); and we’ve been challenged to dip deep into our wells again to find God deep within. Each Sunday we have moved a bit closer to the end of the journey – a step closer to Jerusalem where Jesus has set his sights.

The danger of being in the wilderness is that without the right nourishment we can give up and die. We can die to the temptations and frustrations around us, we can die to the barrenness of the atmosphere in the wilderness, we can dry up and be blown away like the ashes of Ash Wednesday if we’re not careful. So God discovered about his beloved children, not just Israel but us as well. At times we are nothing but dry bones. God showed Ezekiel the proof in a vision:

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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

We are the dry bones in the desert. God awakens us. If we are prepared to realize where we are we can find our way back to life and out of the wilderness.

Ezekiel prophesies into an Israel in exile in Babylon. Ezekiel, son of Buzi, was taken away in 597 BCE and from that vantage point he witnessed the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. The Israelites find themselves asking a very practical question, “If everything about us and our God is centered in Jerusalem and now Jerusalem

is no more, then where does that leave us?" King Josiah's reforms had ended the worship of lesser gods and goddesses and brought the worship of Israel's God, YHWH, into Jerusalem and to the Temple built for YHWH. Sacrifices, pilgrimages, offerings, festivals – all worship was centered in Jerusalem. But now Jerusalem had fallen.

"By the rivers of Babylon— there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? (Psalms 137:1-6)

A few chapters before the dry bones vision, God lets Ezekiel know that the cries of Israel have been heard. "Now you, mortal," says God, "say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: 'Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?'" (Ezekiel 33:10)

How can we live? Here is the answer. These dry bones can live again.

I don't want to be in the valley of death. I don't want to be walking amidst the dried-out, sun-bleached, dead-as-dead-can-be bones of a once vibrant people. Yet that is where Israel finds itself – and perhaps where we find ourselves all too often these days. Israel was in exile – taken from the land that Abraham had secured for them. They were exiled and separated from their God – or so they thought. God is in Jerusalem; we are in Babylon.

There's probably nothing deader than being separated from God. You know that. Look at your acquaintances that have no relationship with God. Look at those in this world who amass wealth and wield power as if it belongs to them. Look at people in this world who have no respect for life or death; who wage war when peace is always attainable. Look at how we treat each other when push comes to shove and "every person for himself or herself" dominates our human interactions. You know that once

you end your relationship with the God who created you your life is dead – as dead as the dry bones of Ezekiel's vision.

The people of Israel thought that's where they were. "We can't get to God in Jerusalem. We're dead as dead can be." Certainly they were feeling abandoned by God, deserted by God, with no hope for the future. Yet here is Ezekiel reassuring them otherwise. God has the power to return you to life. If God can breathe into these deader-than-dead bones, then just imagine what God can do for you who is only dying, not yet dead.

There is no mistaking the parallels that Ezekiel wants to draw attention to with this vision. God is breathing into the bones just as happened at creation. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a *wind* from God swept over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1) A wind/breath/spirit from God – the Hebrew word *ruah* has all of those meanings. *Ruah* – the breath of God. Here Ezekiel's vision pounds us with the reminder – 9 times in 5 verses the prophet uses *ruah*:

*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, "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." I prophesied*

*as he commanded me, and the **breath** came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

The word is as effective here as it was in creation – God breathes and it happens. Nine times Ezekiel reminds us of God’s creative breath. By the end of the chapter we must know that God is as intimately a part of these people – and of us – as was true at creation.

So we come full circle since Ash Wednesday, when we were reminded that we are but dust, and now we know what God can do with a pile of dry bones and dust – we can live and be part of God’s living world. The wilderness is not the end. It is just a beginning. The direction out of the desert toward new life is pointed out to us and so we journey out of the wilderness.

If God can breathe new life into these dry bones. If God can resurrect us from the depths of death and despair. If God can take us from ashes to an empty tomb. Then imagine what God can do for us right now.

“Why be you when you can be new?” Why be you? Because you are created in the image of God who breathes life into you over and over and over again.

The Israelites in Babylonian exile thought that they needed to return to Jerusalem for God to continue to love and protect and keep them. Even Ezekiel seemed to believe that. They – and he – thought that they needed Jerusalem to be whole again. And God returns them to the land – but really they didn’t need the land to be whole. God speaks to Ezekiel:

[The Israelites] 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.*

“I will put you back on your soil,” yes, that’s true. But what’s more important in what God says through Ezekiel is that “I will put my spirit [breath] within you, and you shall live.” Wherever you are, God’s spirit, God’s breath, will be within you.

Remember, here is a people taken from their home and sent far away, captives of an enemy. They do not expect to ever return. They are despondent and without hope. They think God has abandoned them in their wilderness time. But what’s going on in this vision? God has not abandoned them. God has not turned away from them. God has followed them into the wilderness – remember that important point – God has come out of where they thought God was in residence and God is in their midst even in their despair. God has left Jerusalem with them; God has been right there with them in Babylonian exile; God has been with this people wherever they are. Just as God followed them – or led them – with Moses through 40 years of wilderness wandering, God is with them always. If they go back to Jerusalem, God is with them. If they leave the land again, God is with them. Never does God abandon these people.

Nor does God abandon *us*. Ever. God is not defeated by the Babylonians. God will never be defeated by anyone or anything that will try to separate us from God. The Babylonians tried to take the Israelites away from God – they failed. The world around us tries to move us away from God – to no avail.

Israel's journey into exile was a part of their moving forward in time. The stories of exile move ahead in time – they recall past journeys but they are all a part of moving forward. This exile recalls the exodus from Egypt. Each Passover, in fact, each year moving forward recalls back to the exodus from Egypt. Israel is moving ahead in time – yet God calls them to life by reversing time. God calls them to new life by bringing life from death. The dry bones could be no more past than they are – dust and rattling. Yet God chooses what is past to bring new life. Israel continues to move ahead in time – eventually moving ahead back to Jerusalem. Yet God backs up time to move them forward.

The point for us is that there is really no need to turn back. We don't need to go back to “the way things used to be” or back to “the good old days.” God can breathe new life into us right where we are. As we continue to move forward – as society matures – as our faith matures – as our journey progresses forward, God can lift us from the deadness of our despair and the dryness of our hopelessness and we are alive again.

If this Lent's journey into the wilderness around us does anything, I pray that it moves us forward to whatever is next in the wilderness, beyond the wilderness, into the new life of the tomorrows ahead. No turning back – move forward into God's new life.

We move forward from here to Jesus' joyous entry into Jerusalem and ahead to the despair of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. The gift of being on this side of our faith history is that we know what comes after that. We know there is new life. The question is – do we believe it for ourselves. Do we believe that resurrection comes to each of us no matter our despair, no matter where we are in exile, no matter where we believe our relationship with God is in crisis, no matter how dead we feel? God comes out to us – meets us on our turf, in our wilderness – and breathes life into these dry bones. And that is well worth the 40 days in the desert.

Breathe on me breath of God. Oh my dry bones, “Hear the word of the Lord!” God, tell these dry bones to live – and they will live.

Amen.