

Preaching at Bethel-Bethany UCC
Lent 5A - Ezk 37:1-14; Jn 11:1-45; Rm 8:1-11
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Can these dry bones live?

Good morning. I always enjoy the opportunity to bring the Word here among you good people of UCC Delavan. Thank you for your tremendous outpouring of love and support shown at my ordination. Your powerful witness through that event touched many people. Thank you.

We've got a great story from Ezekiel this morning. The prophet tells us about a vision, a dream he had, so life-like that he and those listening question if it wasn't real.

Just imagine it—the hand of the Lord scoops him aloft, soaring against the wind, over great plains and forests full of trees, across rushing waters, and ascending over the mountain peaks, setting him in a valley; *full of dry bones...*

God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, so many bones, and they were dry, very dry.

God said to me, “Oh man, CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?” I answered, (wide eyed) “God only knows!”

Then God said to me, “Speak to these bones. You are a prophet—*PROPHECY* to these bones. 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; I turned, hesitantly to the bones, and I looked at them, and I looked at God, and I was like *really?* and God was like REALLY! And the whole time, I tell you, I was thinking to myself...CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?

So I went ahead, and took a deep breath, and trying to recall God's words as best I could, I said: “O dry bones, HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD!” (pause) I didn't really know how loudly to speak, because I'm not really sure how well dry bones can hear, so I just went with some gusto.

And the bones just lay there, so, I continued “God said to me to say to you: I will cause breath to enter you and YOU SHALL LIVE!” (Look around). YOU SHALL LIVE...and 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. And YOU SHALL LIVE! Did I say that one yet?”

And there was this noise, this rattling, it was coming from the bones, they were rattling, I mean can you IMAGINE?! The bones were rattling, they were rattling and they were coming together! Bones were connecting to other bones. I mean, can you imagine? Can you? I mean, CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?

So I'm looking at these bones coming together, and there were *sinews on them*, and *flesh had come upon them*, and *skin had covered them*; but something was missing...there was no *breath* in them.

*Ahh, (breathe in and out) the *breath!** Here, in Hebrew, the word is RUACH, the word that means breath, but also means wind, and Spirit, and is the word we morph into Holy Spirit in the New Testament. RUACH, breath, wind, Spirit.

So the bones--they had movement, they were animated, they joined together, and they became covered in all sorts of flesh and skin, like a proper living-thing, but they had no life. There was no *breath*.

Then I turned (startled), and I was startled because God was right there. I mean, like right in my face! And God said to me, (with intense excited eyes) "Prophecy to the *breath*, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds—North, South, East, and West, O breath—and breathe upon these without life, that THEY MAY LIVE."

And, *again*, I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath-(pointedly) the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, as God as my witness, and there were so many of them, a vast multitude!

Then God said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of my people, my beloved. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' So my prophet, speak to them, prophecy, 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 my beloved, the land of the living. 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 give you a place to call your own; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,'" says the Lord.

Here ends Ezekiel's vision.

Yes, that abruptly. No exposition, just this imaginative, spirited evocation. The rest is up to us.

This is the job of the prophet, to call to action, to evoke a spirit that then drives our motivation to make it so, to live the dream, to learn from even the very dry bones, as we try to answer the seemingly impossible question: CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?

At the Guest House, we serve 86 men in shelter—and throughout this bitterly cold winter, we served as many as 110 with the additional overflow beds. As Manager of Volunteer Services, I have contact with a great many people seeking, through our agency, the opportunity to serve people experiencing homelessness. I encounter many different attitudes among these potential volunteers; attitudes about their service work, what it means, and why they do it; and many attitudes about people experiencing homelessness, what it means to be homeless, and why people are homeless.

From students seeking the opportunity to stretch their understanding of the world they live in, to well-meaning people motivated to serve by their faith commitments. We welcome so many people in, and we are happy to have them serve as part of our mission.

But the ones that make me wonder, are the people who come in, who seem to have it all together; they have easy access to all the things they need: they have a nice home that's warm when they need it to be and cool when they want it to be, it has cupboards and a fridge or maybe two full of food that they can eat when they wish, they have the ability to choose where to shop for that food and what quality of food they prefer to consume, they have clothes on their back—and nice clothes—name-brand clothes, and name-brand shoes, and name-brand electronics, and they arrived at the Guest House using reliable transportation, sometimes very high-end transportation. And these clues identify to me that they have a reliable source of income, likely from a well-paying job, which also indicates they likely had access to a quality education, and probably even experienced a well-rounded childhood with a family that loved and supported them. Now, I'm not saying that they never had to struggle in their lives, but, they're...comfortable. Often they come to me speaking words like, "I want to be the hands and feet of Jesus," and "I want the opportunity to serve the 'least of these.'"

And what am I doing up here saying "they, they, they" over and over, when I should be saying me? I? Because I, too, have said these things, so I also include myself here. *I'm* comfortable. I have a home and good food, I buy what I choose to eat from stores that I choose to shop at, I have nice clothing much of it with recognizable brand names, and most of it brand new, or in good condition anyway, I have nice shoes, name-brand electronics, and I own a car as long as I pay the bill every month. I have a reliable source of income at a place where I enjoy working, and it is more than enough. I attended preschool through the 12th grade, *then* went to college, and *then* graduate school. I have a good life, with a partner and family who love and support me. Now, I've had my struggles, and I'll probably stumble across a few more in my life, who knows? But, I'm comfortable.

And at the Guest House, I'm comfortable. But I wasn't always. And many people who I see come to volunteer or even just to visit the Guest House aren't always comfortable either. Often, people come to the Guest House with stereotypes, pre-conceived notions of what it means to be homeless and what homeless people are like, and what a shelter is, or should be like. Perpetuated by historical iterations of shelter or ideas and images in popular media, or what-have-you, many think that the Guest House will be a scary place full of sad or terrifying or violent people, a place where opportunity and prosperity come to die, a place of desolation, brokenness, aridness - a place of dry bones. They may even look around and think to themselves: "CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?"

Well, let me share with you the story of DUWAYNE:

"Last winter was a time of loss for me," Duwayne said. Within a 90 day period, he lost his mother, brother, sister, and grandfather. "The hardest was when my mother passed."

The valley was filled with dry bones...

Duwayne had spent the last 20-odd years caring for his ailing mother and father. That was his full-time job, his whole life.

He continues, "After she passed, I just couldn't handle it anymore, having lost so many close family in a short time." Duwayne shared that he became deeply depressed, and contemplated taking his life. At one point, he sat with the gun in his hands, and when he pulled the trigger, the gun jammed.

The valley was filled with dry bones, so many bones, and they were dry, painfully dry.

"That was a turning point, definitely." Duwayne realized that after caring for his parents for so long, it was time to focus on caring for himself. With nowhere to turn, Duwayne called 2-1-1, and was referred to the Guest House not only for shelter, but also for our array of programs which include employment assistance and counseling services.

"Oh man, CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?" – God only knows.

At the Guest House, Duwayne worked with his case manager Angela to create a plan to work on his personal well-being and getting his life back together. "With Angela, her listening and understanding are an important part of my recovery. With her, I was able to open up, which was comforting and rewarding."

Then God said to me, "Speak to these bones. You are a prophet—PROPHECY to these bones. Say to them: 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.'"

"Now, I've been through the Resident Manager training," Duwayne says, "and work in the Safe Havens, caring for people experiencing homelessness and living with mental illness. And I've reached my savings goal and I've found a place of my own to live again."

"I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

"To me, living at the Guest House has been a rewarding experience. Each accomplishment I receive, I dedicate to my mom and dad--and my brother, and sister, and grandfather, too--for all they've been to me."

Then God said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of my people, my beloved. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' So my prophet, speak to them, 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 my beloved, the land of the living. 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 give you a place to call your own; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,'" says the Lord.

Now, Duwayne's dry bones are one thing. But I wonder if his are the only dry bones. Duwayne's story is powerful, it is deep, and it is wide, it cuts to the heart. I'm confident that you can connect with

Duwayne's story. And I'm sure you would also connect with the story of Terrence who lost his job due to continued layoffs in our state's shrinking manufacturing industry, and you'd also connect with Stanley's story, who lost his job due to an out-of-the-blue medical condition, the medical bills ballooned out of control, and without the ability to work, his home was taken.

If I asked you about Terrence and Stanley, "Can these dry bones live?" I'm confident you'd say "yes."

But I wonder, I wonder about the stories we hear where, not death or other unforeseen circumstances lead to a guest's homelessness, but what we see as "poor life choices" have led to their desperate condition.

James is addicted to methamphetamines, Jeff? crack cocaine. Al? He dealt drugs for many, many years, and lived a very cushy life until his empire fell due to his increasing addiction, not to the drugs he sold, but to alcohol.

CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE? Now, we're not so sure, are we?

I wonder...I wonder if those without sin aren't casting the first stone. I wonder if we—who have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—I wonder...do we check our love at the door of Bethel-Bethany? Or do we clutch all too close to our chests like a purse we're afraid will be snatched when we enter places of discomfort, places like the Guest House?

Or in the imagery of Ezekiel, when we find ourselves in the dark valley surrounded by dry bones, do we hold our breath? Does it catch in our throats? And doesn't that prevent the RUACH, the breath, wind, spirit, from blowing where it will? At what point do we stop prophesying about the breath of God, the Spirit of Life? God's never-ending love? Do we put our love-tinted glasses away in their cases, and see only through the foggy lens of sin?

CAN THESE DRY BONES LIVE?

Of the people who come to the Guest House, seeking to be the "hands and feet of Jesus for the 'least of these,'" I ask, and sometimes implore, where is God at the Guest House? Where are the cracks in the system—the system of stereotypes and preconceived ideas perpetuated by our culture of prosperity which says that the "least of these" are at fault for their own desperation? And where is the Spirit of Life always already flowing among these men, and where is it overflowing through those cracks in the system we in our brokenness have built against the word of God?

CAN OUR DRY BONES LIVE?

I wonder if we haven't become all too focused on our human brokenness so that brokenness is all we see, and thus, all we seek.

CAN OUR DRY BONES LIVE?

Hear the words of Paul to the early church:

There is, therefore, now, no condemnation for those who are beloved of God. For the law of the Spirit of life, proven in the life of Jesus Christ, has set you free from the law of sin and of death. For those who live according to human brokenness set their minds on sin, but those who live according to the Spirit of Life set their minds on the things of the Spirit of Life. To set the mind on human brokenness is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. But you are not bound by human brokenness; you have life in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you...

If the Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in you; then God, who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through the Spirit of Life that dwells in you.

When we go into the world, seeking love and allowing ourselves to be drawn into and around it by the Spirit of Life, we will find life. When we let ourselves be pushed and pulled by the winds of the Spirit, we will find flourishing, and together, we will flourish. When we find that our breath is caught, or being held in, but choose to breathe, we embody our God-given resilience. For our breath, is the breath of God given to us at creation, the same ruach or Spirit of Life that God breathed over the face of the deep then, and the same breath that gives our dry bones life now.

AMEN. Or in other words:

“We are the music makers,
And we are the dreamers of dreams...
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world for ever, it seems...
A breath of our inspiration
Is the life of each generation;
A wondrous thing of our dreaming
Unearthly, impossible seeming—
The soldier, the king, and the peasant
Are working together in one,
Till our dream shall become their present,
And their work in the world be done.”

AMEN and AMEN.