

FROM OUR **Pulpits**

Hope for a People of Dry Bones

Part of an occasional series, a sermon on the restorative power of God's Spirit in the midst of the challenges we face | **MARK PATTIE**

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, "Prophesy 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, "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.

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" (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

In 597 B.C. the Babylonian army had come against the nation of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. They had surrounded Jerusalem, and the city capitulated. Rather than destroying it, Babylon marched off with their king and many of their leaders and citizens back to Babylon.

Over the next ten years, the rebellion in Jeru-

salem began to percolate and rise up again, so that in 587 B.C., the Babylonian army returned and this time showed no mercy. They destroyed the army of Judah. The bones of the warriors littered the valleys. They destroyed the city and they brought the temple of God to the ground. Then they marched off again with the rest of the leaders and all others who might be wealthy or among the intellectuals of their society. They marched them off to Babylon. It was the kind of thing that happened to many nations in the ancient world; conquering nations would march those who were conquered off into exile where they were assimilated into another society and lost to history forever.

The people of Jerusalem were in exile, and they wondered, in this foreign land, whether they could still worship the God of the Bible, the God of Abraham, the God of Moses.

"How can we sing the Lord's song here in this foreign land?" Their sense of God was centered in the temple and in Jerusalem, and with all of that wiped out, many couldn't help but question, "Is the god of the Babylonians stronger than ours? Is our God the God to be worshiped and, if so, how can we worship here in this foreign land, here without the temple in which the very presence of God resides?"

Their whole sense of identity as a people was caught up in these questions. Their sense of loss was so deep that their bones, the part of their being that the Psalms use to describe the inmost core of their being, were dry and lifeless. When we are in distress, our "bones burn like a furnace" (Psalm 102:3). When we have sinned, our bones hurt such that when God forgives and cleanses us, "the bones that you have crushed rejoice" (Psalm 51:8). In the midst of their exile, cut off from the Spirit of God, the bones of the Hebrew people have dried up. Their sense of identity, their sense of strength, their sense of hope were cut off from the land, from the temple, from the faith that they had. They were like dry bones.

It is to these people, cut off and without hope, that God calls Ezekiel to speak. ➤

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Dry bones cannot, no matter how hard they try, bring life to themselves or to the world.

I can't help but think about the ways in which in our society, we may feel like people of dry bones. I was speaking with someone dear to me who lost his wife recently. She was exactly, to the day, the same age as I am. At one point in our conversation, I described how Psalm 23 has spoken to me in times of loss, yet I could sense how hard it was for him to connect, to feel the hope that the psalm conveys. His bones are dried up right now.

I think about those who are struggling in relationships, trying hard, and trying harder, hoping and hoping, and yet, not seeming to get anywhere; only becoming ever-more exhausted and worn out.

I think about the church here in the Western world—which in some ways appears to be turning into dry bones. Europe used to be the center of Christianity. So many of the hymns we sing

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are from there. Yet, what is it? One percent, 2 percent, 4 percent of the people actually go to church there anymore. And here in the United States, we keep saying we want to get back to where the church is central to our civic life, we want people to come to faith, to connect meaningfully with Christ and his church, to grow so that they live out their faith purposefully in the world—and yet, the church and peoples' interest in the faith proclaimed by the church seems to be drying up. On some level, we can relate to what it means to be dry bones.

I read of a pastor who invited his congregation to imagine themselves after their deaths, placed in boxes and buried in the ground, their bodies decomposing. Can you get your mind into that? All that's left are these dry bones. Laying there in our coffins, we might say to one another, "Okay bones, let's go! Let's get up. Let's get ourselves out of our graves. Let's get back to work. Come on!"

"What? It's not working? Then try harder. Come on, let's do this thing."

And the question we'd have to ask is, "Can we do this thing?"

We can yell all we want. We can try all we want. We can plan and think positively as much

as we want, but the fundamental truth is that we cannot do this thing. We cannot. Nobody can. Dry bones cannot, no matter how hard they try, bring life to themselves or to the world.

It is to dry bones like these that God speaks yet again through the prophet. The word of the Lord comes to those bones who are worn out, who are worried, who are anxious, who aren't sure what the future holds for themselves, for their family members, for the church, for this nation, for this world. It is to dry bones that God speaks his word and says, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

Of course, maybe that is a significant part of what is missing for us in our society today. Maybe that is part of what is missing for us in the midst of our struggles personally, and as churches, as a nation, as a world.

God says, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" But we aren't listening.

Again and again in the Scriptures, beginning in Genesis 1, we read that the word of the Lord is creative: "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (v. 3).

Again and again in the Scriptures, beginning in Genesis 2, we read that the Spirit of the Lord breathes life: "Then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (v. 7).

In the Gospels, we read that "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). And we hear the good news that God's word is present to us, God's word is available to us, God's word speaks to us, creatively and powerfully even now, through the person of Christ and through the Holy Scriptures. And we desperately need to listen. As Peter, in the midst of the questions and challenges facing him, said to Jesus, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life" (John 6:68).

And so Ezekiel prophesies. He speaks the word of the Lord, even though it may not seem to make any sense for him to do so. Even though he may not understand how such words could become true, still he prophesies. He speaks the word of the Lord that is given to him.

As I spoke about Psalm 23 with the dear person in my life who had lost his wife, on some

level I couldn't help but wonder, "Can he hear this? Is this going to make any sense to him at all?" And yet, still, not hammering him with it, but gently sharing a few words of how it has spoken to me, I trusted that God was calling me, yet again, to speak the word of the Lord, especially in the midst of struggle.

Indeed, for all of us, especially in the midst of our struggles, our challenges, our worries, God calls us to *speak* the word of the Lord and to *listen* to the word of the Lord. This is an important aspect of why we gather to worship God together week after week, in the midst of the struggles of our lives and the troubles of our world; we come to speak the word of the Lord and to hear the word of the Lord, again and again and again, especially when we feel like we have no hope.

Ezekiel speaks this word even when he can't begin to imagine what this word of God can accomplish. And God calls him to speak not only to the dry bones, but to the wind, the very breath of God.

I love the way this passage unfolds as Ezekiel prophesies to the four winds. As I've read this text through the years, I've always understood it to mean that he should call to the four winds of the earth; you know, the east, west, north, and south. And it certainly makes sense that way. That could be what Ezekiel is thinking about as he considers these words.

But the prophet Jeremiah speaks of the four winds, not as the four winds of the earth, but as the four winds of heaven, that come from the four quadrants of heaven. "Now that's what I'm talking about," says God. "That's the Wind I want you to call on." No wind on earth can do what needs to be done. What we need is the Spirit of God that comes from the four quadrants of heaven—the Wind that rushed into the church on Pentecost, the Wind that God still sends

into his church and into his people today.

We prophesy today. We speak the word that God has given us to speak today to the Wind. Like Ezekiel, we speak this prayer even when it seems it is beyond our capacity, beyond our pay grade, beyond our authority. Who are we to call on the Spirit of God? We are the people of God, called by God to pray for his Spirit, to call upon his Spirit and watch as the Wind of God comes in and gives life.

Ezekiel was one of those who went off into the Babylonian exile with the leaders of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. That experience was long-lasting; the exile didn't begin to come to an end until some fifty years later. Yet in the midst of that long and difficult time, Ezekiel was called to speak the word of the Lord, to call upon the Spirit of God, because when God says something, we can be sure that God will act.

God has promised us the Holy Spirit. So as we think of the challenges in our lives—as we think of the challenges facing the church of Christ around the world, and the challenges we face here at home, may we continue to speak the word of the Lord, to listen to the word of the Lord, and to pray for the Spirit of the Lord.

By God's Spirit and word, the world was created and life breathed into us. By God's Spirit and word, the church was created and life was breathed into us. And today, by God's Spirit and word, we can be confident that God continues his creative and life-giving work. Apart from God's Spirit and word there is no hope in the midst of the challenges we face; these bones are just too dried out and lifeless. We cannot do this thing in our own power and strength. Yet God has spoken, and God's Spirit has been promised. Be of good courage. Hear the word of the Lord and pray for the Holy Spirit to give us life. ■