

Lent A5

April 2, 2017

“Boot Camp for the Soul: Dead Ends”

Central Presbyterian Church

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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, “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 must have been tired. He must have been tired and discouraged and maybe he was burned out. He was a prophet to God’s people and he had watched with dread as they lost their way and lost touch with God’s hopes and dreams for them. And then God presented to Ezekiel a strange vision of a valley of bones.

Tired, discouraged, burned out Ezekiel looks out over the dusty valley and the piles of bones that represent God’s people who have lost their way, and God asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?” These bones that once upon a time were offering prayers in the sanctuary, or giving a coin or two to a homeless man on the street, but had forgotten now how to pray and how to give—could these bones live again?

Lord knows Ezekiel had tried. He had preached and proclaimed and prayed and cajoled. And yet here they were, dried up and dusty. Nothing much they could do about it. Nothing much Ezekiel could do about it. And Ezekiel says, “O Lord God, you know.” Not exactly an answer. Not exactly an enthusiastic commitment one way or the other. He doesn’t know, but he does know one thing, he isn’t God and with God it could be possible. “I don’t know,” Ezekiel says, “it doesn’t look very promising, but your power, your awesome power, God, is another thing entirely.”

And then God says, “Prophesy to these bones, preach to them, tell them to listen and tell them my breath is going to enter them and they will live again.” I don’t know about you, but preaching to bones is not on my bucket list. If you see me preaching some misty morning in Mt. Hebron Cemetery, call my wife, please! He may have felt a little silly to do it, but Ezekiel calls out and by God’s breath, God’s wind, God’s Spirit, those dry bones that had no future started to get together.

It doesn't matter how we feel or what we presume is possible, God is sending the Spirit out anyway.

I want us to be a little more like Ezekiel. When we see no hope, when the impossible is before us-- that we remember God's power at work in the Spirit is a power beyond us, beyond our expectations.

I recently heard about a man in Montreal who was addicted to drugs and alcohol and had been living on the streets for 25 years. It was a hopeless situation and there appeared to be no way out. He doubted God cared or even noticed, and he considered killing himself. But one day, he doesn't know how or why it happened, he passed by an old church, one he had passed many times, and went in. God took hold of him, he says, and his life changed. He battled his addictions and was inspired to become a minister so he could devote his life to helping others like him who were still on the street. Today he's a Catholic priest and he's initiated a new mission that gives food, shelter and ministry to those in need. "This is what I will do for the rest of my life," he says.

I experienced what I think was the breath of God blowing in a community, when I was serving a NYC church that was very dry and dusty. We were down to just the last remnant of the congregation coming to church on Sundays. These folks had been members all their lives but the numbers were dwindling and the old programs and activities were done just the same way they had always been done. But something strange happened. All of a sudden we had some visitors, immigrants from Ghana. Within six months they were equal in number to the veteran members, joining the choir and starting an African dance group for the children. Just before I left that congregation they had an evening extravaganza of Ghanaian food and dance, and new life was being breathed into what had been some bones, some dry, dry bones.

O Lord God, there are a lot of things I don't know. I don't know if peace is possible. I don't know how all the needs of the poor can be met. I don't know if we can stop global warming. But I do know there is a power that comes from God that makes all things new and I want us to trust it, even when we see bones that are very dry, like Ezekiel.

And in another way, I want us to be more like Ezekiel who accepted God's invitation to prophesy even when he couldn't imagine how God was going to bring those bones together to live again. Let's not wait until we have all our questions answered, all our doubts erased, before we dare to proclaim the power of God that brings new life into impossible situations.

I realize we may cross our fingers when we say parts of the Apostles Creed. Maybe we don't know about that "being conceived by the Holy Ghost" stuff, or "born of the virgin Mary," or maybe even sometimes "on the third day he rose again and ascended to heaven." Truth is, most of us have dry bones of our own, doubts, reservations, and hesitations.

But maybe we can worry less about what we believe exactly, like Ezekiel did, and pay attention more to God's power. Maybe we can worry less about what we think is or isn't possible, and

concentrate instead on what God is doing. Maybe we can worry less about how we're discouraged or burned out with exasperating circumstances, and concentrate more on what God is asking us to do-to call the Spirit to breathe through our words and actions.

These days I'm feeling a little like Ezekiel might have felt- I look out at the world and I'm overwhelmed. Fear-hopelessness-hate-lives in crisis-creation in jeopardy- I struggle to keep up and there's no way I can understand it completely or make it better on my own. But there is a power that can. And I can preach it with my life. You too can dare to look out over the valleys of dry bones and obey God's instruction to channel God's breath toward the impossible and the incomprehensible.

Now, we turn to this table to encounter that Spirit of Jesus who breathed new life into us at our baptism. Here he will feed us with hope and the promise that he has defeated the power of death so we might live beyond it here in this life and in the next.

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

"O Lord God, you know."