

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

### **Romans 8:22-27**

<sup>22</sup>We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; <sup>23</sup>and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup>For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? <sup>25</sup>But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup>Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup>And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

“Dem Bones”  
The Rev. Lisa Durkee  
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**Let us pray:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones . . .” I don’t know about you, but I never knew any of the words of this song in perfect order. I remember watching the character Herman Munster sing it on the children’s program I watched as a kid, and even faint recollections of singing it in school, but never did we sing together the repeated line, “Hear the word of the Lord.” So, this week I have found myself humming the song and wondering why it was that enslaved African-Americans sang about these bones? It is really only in knowing the context of the passage of Ezekiel that this makes sense. Conversely, I think that trying to get our minds around what it meant to the people of Africa who were brought here against their will can also help us understand the destitution of the people of Israel in Babylon.

Toward the end of the oracle in Ezekiel 37:1-14, we hear profound words of lament. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” there is similar language throughout the Hebrew Bible, and we even carry it into the present day. We find the people of Israel “bone weary.” “The reference to “bones” here is an idiomatic way of referring to one’s deepest self, or, in the case of “our bones,” a way for the community to refer to its most essential self,” is how a scholar named Rolf Jacobsen has put it. The people of Israel have been wounded to their core, even while they continue to live. They are not skeletons at this point, but their lives as they have known them are dried up. They may have felt beyond hope. And it is to this despair that Ezekiel is called to prophesy. Into these depths, God breathes the promise of resurrection and new life.

I read a very straightforward and meaningful statement this week by Norman Cousins, a notable journalist for the New York Post, as well as the History Review. He writes, “Death is not the greatest loss in life. The greatest loss is what dies inside us while we live.” It is to this kind of death that Paul was speaking in his letter to the church in Rome. The people of Israel may well have felt as though

they had died inside. The people of Africa who were brought here against their will to serve slave masters may have felt as though they had no cause for hope. But they did have hope! There is always hope!

There is an agency in Denver, Colorado called Dry Bones, about which I discovered while reading about this hymn and also about the text from Ezekiel. In order to conceive of this Christian Mission in Denver I want to read from their website, where we are told to “Imagine entering a valley where dead things come to life. Bones without flesh suddenly rise up from the earth and receive breath, muscle, and skin. Death becomes life and life walks out forever changed.

Symbolically and spiritually, this is what we desire for the many dead and dying young people of Denver. Downtown is their valley.

The primary target of Dry Bones is the large population of homeless teens living in downtown Denver. The youth who live on the streets of Denver range in age from 12 to the mid-twenties. Dry Bones connects these kids with resources, nutrition, new friends, entertainment, and the Gospel.” To read the testimonies of the young people who have found new life through this mission is extraordinary. The abuses that some of them suffered, and from which they saw no way out goes beyond what I am fit to describe. Yet, many of them grow into a new life through the outreach of a mission of Dry Bones. They are enlivened.”

Breathing new life into that which is depleted is an image I would like for us to hold to for a while. As we all anticipate our coming together in person with members and friends of our congregation who have not been with us through the time of the pandemic, we may carry some concern. Our church has struggled in the past several years. Our numbers are down and we miss the sense of community that comes most palpably when we see one another in close proximity. Still, there is life in this church. There is life in this church, even when any one of us may feel dispirited. Do you hear the word? Dispirited? Although we think of this as meaning without hope, we may picture today any person or even a congregation with the breath of the Spirit somehow having waned. How may we allow for the breath of God to infuse us today?

Rolf Jacobson is Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Jacobsen makes a connection between Paul's letter and this passage from Ezekiel when he writes, "And "the breath (xwr) came into them, and they lived" (v. 10). As already noted, in Ezekiel's explanation of the vision, he summarizes the point: "I will put my spirit (xwr) with you, and you shall live" v. 14). The prophet's insistent use of repetition drums the point of the message into our heads: God's spirit is the key. With God's spirit, anything is possible. Without it, existence is just flesh and blood. But with God's spirit, there is life—and what Jesus called fullness of life. And there is no place on earth, no when in time, and no what in sin or situation, that can keep God's Spirit away from God's people (see Romans 8:31-38)."

<sup>9</sup>"But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

<sup>10</sup>But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. <sup>11</sup>If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."

What about in our own lives? What does a resurrected life look like? While we may not have seen bones come to life, I know I have seen lives that have been decimated by drugs and alcohol or hindered by a lack of vision invigorated and purposeful in new ways. I know the joy of men and women who have been released from prison after years, incarcerated because of crimes committed while they were addicted. New life has not only been sobriety, but has meant continuing to look outside themselves in service rather than continuing to seek to meet only personal needs. New life has meant acknowledging that there *can be* newness at any point, at any age.

I can't tell you how many late career shifts to ministry I met while in seminary myself. I think especially of a friend, a former lawyer, who took her first call to a church in a town in which the Congregational church had dwindled to a couple of dozen members. My friend had felt in herself what she called puffs of Spirit that became gusts that led her to seminary. She was called to that small church, where

I know that her exuberance, her spirited preaching and encouragement was part of what led them to *do more* in their community. She had herself felt frustrated in her work, had said she was “dying.” Her new life and career was a part of helping a so-called dying church name the Spirit yet within them. Their increasingly visible presence in community was a part of their growth. I think in this way, too, of the Community Church in Lincolnville, that also had shrunk to just 15 members at one time. Although not as large again as they were some five years ago, rather than talking about the possibility of closing, the 55 members now in attendance continually ask what the Spirit moves them to do.

In the days ahead, we may ask what does a post-pandemic First Congregational church of Blue Hill look like. What may be our resurrection? And just what does a resurrected church look like? In what new and old directions will we look in order to invite rebirth. This may be a rekindling, or a gentle breath to reignite glowing embers that are familiar. This may also be unexpected gusts that light fires in individuals who are compelled to share with all of us. I am grateful for the energy of Dale and Kipp as they fuel our celebration of Pride on June 12th. Will our exuberant, spirited, joyful party in honor of love be something that makes invitation in new ways? How else is the Spirit moving us to celebrate? How else is the Spirit moving us to care for each other and for those we do not know—yet? How may we translate God’s love for us into our love for this gift of life, this gift of the earth, the gift of renewed awareness of our interconnection the world over? The Spirit of the Lord is upon us! The church is being reborn even as we speak! How may we share the good news!?

Let us pray: Oh, Spirit of the Living God, fall fresh on us. Melt us; mold us; fill us; use us, we pray. Amen.