

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
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Ezekiel 37:1-14/Lent 4A

“Seeking: Can These Bones Live?”

This morning we’ve heard 2 really good stories; two of my favorite stories, actually. Rich with details and imagery, we can practically smell the stench of death on Lazarus and feel in our bones the dry desert air through which Ezekiel walks.

Now normally I would choose John’s gospel on which to preach. In fact, I’ve probably preached on the story of Mary, Martha and Lazarus more than any other story. But it’s hard to pass up Ezekiel and those dry bones being brought back to life, especially as we consider where we’ve been as a congregation and celebrate our achievements of 2022 (I do hope you had a chance to look at the annual report before worship) and reflect on what we want to do in 2023.

Our story opens with God taking Ezekiel on quite the tour and asking along the way, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Now, what a ridiculous question to ask. Can dead bones live?!? Of course dead bones can’t live. Why would the Lord ask such a dumb question?

In our story the Lord leads the prophet back and forth through a maze of human skeletons; skeletons of Israelites who had been slaughtered by their enemies, to be exact. But this is more than just a gruesome sight. This is a hotbed of all that is unclean. Anything dead was considered impure by Israelite priests and therefore labeled “do not touch”. This means that Ezekiel, who is both prophet and priest, is not only walking through a valley of bones, he’s walking through a valley of skeletons he shouldn’t be anywhere near. So we can only imagine the level of repulsion Ezekiel feels as he strolls through that vast graveyard.

Ezekiel himself was deported to Babylon in 597 BCE in the first wave of deportees. And for the next 11 years, he would deliver a message of gloom and doom to Judah. In fact, this message is what constitutes the first half of Ezekiel’s book. The prophet is incredibly pessimistic about people. He believes the people brought their devastation upon themselves because of their disobedience to God, and he

insists that the people are entirely responsible for the consequences of their choices. Truth be told, Ezekiel sees little evidence that the people will make better moral choices in the future than they have in the past.

But then he had a change of heart.

Maybe it was Jerusalem falling to the Babylonians that did it; or maybe it was the temple being burned to the ground or the second wave of deportees arriving or the Davidic monarchy coming to an end. Whatever it was, Ezekiel has a change of heart and begins to prophesy hope. “Mortal, can these bones live?” God thunders. There is only one correct answer for a faithful man like Ezekiel, “Only you know Lord. Only you know.” To say no to God’s question would have been a sign of unfaithfulness, so the prophet couldn’t say no, no matter how cynical he had become. And to say yes would have been a sign of too much hubris. So Ezekiel answers in the most faithful way he can. “Only you know, Lord. Only you know.”

Can these bones live? That’s what God asks. And that’s the question Ezekiel was faced with answering.

Is it possible to breathe new life into dead bones? Is it possible for the community to give new life and usefulness to their hopes and aspirations, and take themselves from a place of decay to a place filled with the breath of the Spirit?

And if it’s possible, what does it take?

Sometimes it takes just one person-but more often and even better it takes a group of people who listen for the voice of God and act, even when it seems ridiculous at the outset.

And that’s what we have done here this past year – listened for the voice of God so we can put life on these bones. Friends, we have done a lot.

- We’ve welcomed 34 new members – a record that hasn’t been achieved in more than 10 years.
- We had 11 baptisms.
- Our 2023 stewardship pledges are up by 15%.
- And our deficit is down by 56%.

- We had sold-out shows in our theater, and a full sanctuary for a music series concert.
- We called Rev. Carrie Winebrenner as our Associate Pastor.
- We tackled difficult topics in our Tough Talks and Sacred Conversations.

All of these point to a church that is vibrant and growing – a church where flesh and bone are coming together and new life is being breathed into them.

But these stats, while noteworthy, don't tell the impact our ministry has on people. I wonder sometimes if you see what I see: the girl who comes forward for the Time with Children and pats the spot beside her so her friend will sit next to her; or if you hear what I hear, like the family I visited in the hospital, who said to me "I'm so grateful to have such a wonderful church family at times like this." I think of the boys I saw running around after church and heading to the balcony, hoping to meet Brent for a quick lesson on the organ; or the 2 little kids playing hide and go seek in McKay Hall and how one of them hid underneath the table while a group of ladies drank coffee, and I don't think the ladies had the slightest clue that girl was under the table because they were too busy catching up with one another.

I hope you know the huge impact your presence makes at a no hate in our state rally when I'm guessing the majority of the people there have faced too much hate from Christians; or the effect the church has when we use our voice to advocate for women whose rights are being dismantled, or display 21 little chairs in the courtyard as a silent witness to lives lost because God cries hard when kids are killed.

Friends, all of this was possible because the Spirit was moving through you, and me, all of us together, raising us and this magnificent church to new life when the odds were not always in our favor.

Now, does this mean we haven't faced and don't face challenges? Of course not. A faithful life isn't without its challenges. But God is present with us in the struggle, and God never leaves us alone. Ezekiel's vision of hope comes in the middle of a painful situation; but dry bones are not the last word. Because God is

present, they can breathe and stand ready for the future, looking forward in hope.

But here I want to interject a bit of a cautionary note, too. A yes, but . . .

Before there is new life and new breath, a resurrection, if you will, there is a death. It sounds so obvious, but we sometimes stop at this point in order to move quickly to the good part.

I often think of what a colleague said to me years ago as we worked with churches in decline, most of whom were set in their ways and refused to change. He asked, “Do we believe in the resurrection so little that we refuse to let some things die?” His words have stuck with me because they are so true. Churches fear death so much – which is to say they fear letting go of things that no longer work, rituals that are past their prime, or old ways of doing things. They fear these things so much that they’d rather die than be brought back to life. So it’s worth the reminder as we look to 2023 that we are in the resurrection business, which means that for life to happen there needs to be a death to old ways of doing things.

I believe with all my heart that the Spirit will continue to move through all of us, putting flesh to bones and helping us realize dreams we don’t even know we have. I believe this, and not because I can prove it to you, or give you the facts or a blueprint for how it’s all going to happen, but because I have faith and I believe with all my heart that nothing is impossible with God.

Friends, I am, by nature, a hopeful person. Truth be told, I’ve never had reason not to be. When I had to go through psychological testing during seminary, something all future ministers must go through, I had a counselor tell me my lack of hardships in life was one of my greatest flaws. I’ve thought about that a lot in my 22 years of ministry, and decided (not surprisingly for you, I’m sure), that he was entirely wrong. That indeed one of my greatest assets, is a sense of hope.

If there is one thing I wish to impart to you, it is a sense of hope. And not a wishy-washy hope, but the defiant, faithful hope that comes from God, the same God who commands lifeless bones to stand on their feet and they do.

I have witnessed so much hope here – witnessed it right in front of my eyes from this very perch. I’ve seen a family hurt by a church find acceptance in this one; I’ve

seen people who struggle with their faith find sympathetic journeyers here; I've heard babies!; and I've seen you grow just a tad bit younger; I've seen you love and support those who faced loss, which includes me – thank you; and I've seen you celebrate baptisms and 100th birthdays, on all the same Sunday.

Is it possible for Ezekiel to breathe new life into dead bones? Is it possible for *the community* to give new life and usefulness to their hopes and aspirations, and take themselves from a place of decay to a place filled with the breath of the Spirit?

Yes, Lord, most definitely, yes.

God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" and it is the same question we are to answer. A year from now what will we say about our life together? The good news is, we're not left alone. God knows the answer, and God calls the equipped, and equips the called. "I will put my spirit within you," the Lord told Ezekiel. "And you shall live."

I believe with all my heart that God will continue to act and intervene in this church, renewing our spirit on the days it is low, giving us hope, and breathing new life into us. God gives us the vision, the tools, the people, the words, and the Spirit to make it so.

Amen.