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The Grave-Robbing Spirit of God

a sermon on Ezekiel 37.1-14

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Dry bones! I have seen them! I am Ezekiel! I've seen the bones! Lying on the valley floor, jumbled up, as if a horrific battle had taken place so long ago no one can remember it. Bones so dry they don't even merit a decent adjective. They can only be called *very* dry.

Have you seen them? Are you also Ezekiel? You look at your life, you see dry bones? You look at your marriage, dry bones? You look at your family, dry bones? You look at your career, dry bones? You look at your church, dry bones? You look at your community, dry bones? Hopefully you don't see dry bones *everywhere* you look, but do you see them? Or, let me ask this another way: Are you getting discouraged in your ministry? You may be thinking, "My ministry? I'm not a pastor." You may not be a pastor, but you are a minister. All Christians are. And your ministry takes place at your work, in your home, in your church and your community. You are a minister to your spouse, your children, your family, your friends and co-workers, your church family, everyone you encounter. You are a minister. What I want to know is: Are you Ezekiel? Do you see dry bones?

Let's get specific about this right from the start. When you think about your ministry as a member of Westminster, do you see dry bones? You care about this church. You are eager to see good things happen – ministry, growth, God's power changing lives. But you get discouraged sometimes. If you have been here a long time, you remember when the pews were fuller and the budget greener. You remember when the session set a goal to have more adult Sunday school classes. We tried, but it didn't happen. Or, you show up for meeting night, but you're the only one on your commission there. Or, you try to organize the men, to get some fellowship and service projects going. Good things happen, but we haven't been able to sustain them. We try. We go for a while. We begin to struggle. We give up until next time. Or, you're in the choir, and you've tried to recruit new singers. Or, you're the chair of a commission, and you left the budget meeting discouraged.

You care about your church, and you see the changes in our culture. The fastest growing religion in America today is "none." That is, people who do not identify themselves with any church or religious tradition. They are 17% of the population and growing [*American Grace*, p. 17]. Very few of them are atheists. Mostly they are people who believe some kind of God exists, but whatever they believe, they have nothing to

do with any church and do not identify with any particular religion. You wonder, how can we reach people for Christ when society is becoming more secular? When our basic beliefs sound less and less credible as young people are socialized into unbelief? You know also that our church is not struggling alone. Churches everywhere struggle with the same challenges. Especially so-called mainline churches like the Presbyterian Church, but not just mainline churches. All churches.

And dare we think about our denomination, which has become so accommodated to the larger, secular culture that it confuses mission with political lobbying and thinks the gospel means everyone is OK just the way they are? American culture has turned sex into an idol by making it the measure of personal fulfillment. We are told by music, television, and movies that the road to happiness and fulfillment is paved with sexual freedom. And what word of truth does the Presbyterian Church (USA) speak into this confusion to give guidance and hope to young people? The General Assembly argued last summer over the definition of marriage! Last year our denomination had a net loss of 63,027 members. That's the equivalent of a church our size disappearing *almost* every day ... Dry bones.

Speaking of marriage, those of you who are married know it is not easy. If you are married, then at one time or another, you have probably decided you married the wrong person. If you have ever thought that, I have a wise word of counsel for you: You did. Don't be too hard on yourself for it, though. The right person doesn't exist. He or she never did. This is because all human beings are broken and sinful, so there is no perfect husband or wife out there. Maybe you did marry a monster. I hope not, but it does happen. More likely you just married a sinner, and you are one yourself, so problems were inevitable. If so, your situation is far from hopeless. A little grace, repentance, and forgiveness go a long way. The reconciling power of Jesus Christ can bring peace to your home. Again, it's not easy. A lot of people look at their marriage and feel unhappy and trapped. Dry bones.

What's true of marriage is true of families: parents, siblings, grown children—you name it. Some of the nicest, sweetest, kindest people in the world can't get along with their family. And who has the power to hurt us like family? And then there's the pain of parents whose grown children reject the gospel and/or choose a bad path in life. I won't labor the point. I'll simply ask: When you look at your family, and your ministry to your family, do you see dry bones?

By now you should be getting the point. You are a minister. Are you Ezekiel? Do you see dry bones? Does the situation look hopeless in one or more of your ministry contexts?

More generally, do you ever think about your life—your own soul—and sing the blues? God's people did in our scripture reading. They were singing the blues before the blues were invented. English translations don't do justice to the poetry in verse 11. They

really are singing the blues: “Dried up, our bones. Perished, our hope. Cut off, we ourselves.” Do you know how that feels? If so, I have an encouraging word for you.

When I was in seminary they drilled into our heads that Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones is about national restoration. Ezekiel was a prophet of the exile. When the Babylonians conquered Judah in war, they destroyed Jerusalem and took its inhabitants into captivity. God’s people wondered why God had abandoned them. They were far from home. They didn’t have their land, their king, or their Temple – the three things that had given stability to their lives, and three things that reminded them of God’s promises and provision. You can see why they felt abandoned. They had lost everything. They were not even sure who they were anymore. The prophets said God hadn’t abandoned them. Prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel said God had punished his people for their sin, but he would restore them someday. He would bring them home again, and make things right. That really is what this passage is about. Resurrection in this passage is a metaphor for national restoration. Ezekiel’s vision was a dramatic way for God to make the promise: “I will bring you home again from exile.”

My seminary drilled this into me. I guess they didn’t want me to embarrass the school by reading this passage at a funeral. My professors were right, to a point, but I still wonder ... I wonder if maybe there isn’t a little residual meaning in this passage after the exiles came home. God kept that promise, but maybe there’s a little more here. In the first century, faithful Jews were reading this as a promise of resurrection, that is, God would literally raise the dead at the end of time. I wouldn’t want to force this point, because I don’t need to. Jesus’ resurrection is enough to guarantee ours. Whether Ezekiel promises us resurrection to eternal life or not may be debated, but Jesus certainly does. And yet ... resurrection is not just about life on the other side of death. It is about new life now; it’s about God’s Spirit and power changing this life today.

This is why you need to recognize the main person in this story, because that’s where the hope for us lies. This passage has a much wider application than just the exile because of who does the work. It’s not Ezekiel. It’s the Holy Spirit – that grave-robbing Spirit of God who opens the graves and gives life where there is no life!

The vision begins when the Spirit of the Lord takes Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones. It ends with God’s promise to his people, “I will put my Spirit within you.” In this passage the words wind/breath/and Spirit appear ten times. In Hebrew they are all the same word *ruah*, so in the original Hebrew the passage is much more vivid. But even in English we can’t miss it. Ezekiel prophesies to the bones: “Hear the Word of the Lord!” The Word of God is powerful. The Word of God gives life. Ezekiel prophesies, and the bones come together. Muscles and sinews and skin and all the rest grow on the bones, but the resulting bodies are still not alive. They lack one thing: the breath of life. Our passage reaches back to Genesis 2, where God forms Adam from the dust of the earth. Then God breathes the breath of life into him and makes him a living

soul. The same thing happens here. God commands, and Ezekiel prophesies to the *ruah*, wind/breath/Spirit. And the wind/breath/Spirit came into them, and they lived, and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

The Holy Spirit gives life! That's the message here. That's the hope God's people live by, whether in exile in Babylon or in Mobile, Alabama, today. God's Holy Spirit gives life! Where hope is gone ... Where bones are dried up ... Where people in despair give up and quit ... God's Spirit gives life.

I have preached before, on many occasions, that the resurrection of Jesus is not just something Christians believe; it is something we live. I end every service the same way: "The power of God that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in you." When you hear that, from now on, I want you to think about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. Think of yourself among that slain host. Your bones dried up and scattered. Then the Word of God makes you whole, and the Holy Spirit gives you life. And you stand up again, on your feet, part of a vast multitude. The people of God.

At the beginning of his letter to the Ephesians, Paul wrote, "I pray that you may know the immeasurable greatness of God's power for us who believe." That's just what we need, God's power, because we've learned the hard way our own power is not enough. We need God's power, and there is only one way to learn about God's power – through experience. Paul goes on, "God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places." Did you get that? The same power that raised Jesus from the dead! We can know it. We can experience it. It gives us life, and for this reason it gives us hope.

I am trying to encourage you, but I may do the opposite if I'm not careful. After all, if the power comes from God, why should we lift a finger? If your marriage is dry bones, why not sit back and wait for the Holy Spirit to change your spouse, or even you? If your career or your workplace is dry bones, why not pray about it then wait to see what God will do? If you want to see our church grow in faithfulness and maybe even in size, can you really say to yourself, "This looks like a job for the Holy Spirit?" – then stand around with your hands in your pockets like a guy in a comic book? That's one of the big differences between Jesus and Superman, by the way. Whenever Superman has a job to do, he tackles it himself while the citizens of Metropolis do nothing. The only time Jesus tackled a job by himself was the cross. He had to do that alone – only he could die for the sins of the world – but other than the cross, he never leaves us to just stand around and watch. From the beginning of his ministry, he gathered disciples to share his work and carry it on. At Pentecost he poured out his Spirit on his people, in order to give them power – Holy Spirit power, resurrection power – so that they could do his work. And that is why we cannot quit working and wait for God to handle things himself: Because he told us to work.

Jesus gave us a mission, and God calls each of us to the work. Are you a deacon? God says get out there and visit people and encourage them. Are you an elder? Look carefully after the church God has entrusted to your care. Are you called to some specific task? You are certainly called to be a disciple in your home and workplace and community. Jesus has given you a job to do. Sure, it is too big for you. But he has promised ... I will be with you. He has the power. Only the Spirit of God can give life where there is no life. You can't do that. I can't. But he can. We do the work. He gives life.

I have learned that in my own work as a preacher. I can't say, "Only God can change a heart. Only the Holy Spirit can bring a person to faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, my part is unimportant. I don't have to study or prepare. I can get up and ramble. Results are up to the Holy Spirit." That attitude does not honor God who called me to preach. I have to give my very best, each week, such as it is – with plenty of prayer that God will act through the sermon with power.

I was talking just yesterday with an elder about the ineffectiveness of preaching. I told him I had been emphasizing a New Testament understanding of the church recently. How the church is not a club. It's the people of God and a family of faith. If you love God, you love his people. He replied that he has been at our church a long time, and he remembers hearing this often. "Why don't people get it?" he asked. "Why haven't they gotten it by now?" I answered that when you teach the New Testament understanding of the church, you are swimming against a strong cultural current. In America, the church is a club. Religion is one small part of a person's life. Church participation is considered optional, and church is seen as a voluntary association of like-minded people. Our culture hammers this way of thinking into us, and just hearing the biblical alternative is not enough. People also have to experience it. That is what the church is for: People not only hear the gospel, they experience it. The church is God's alternative to the world. There's the way everyone else does things, and then there's God's way. The church exists so people can experience God's way. The elder then asked me, "But what happens when the church is so much like everyone else that people can't tell the difference?" I said, "Well, then you have dry bones ... and only God's Spirit can make them live again."

When you work for God – as all of us do – you have to avoid two attitudes. One is defeat. You can never say, "There's no point going on. The situation is hopeless." That's because nothing is impossible with God. This is a true story: A Christian couple invited their neighbors to go to church with them. The neighbors politely declined. The Christians did not badger. They were not obnoxious. But they did pray. And they did keep inviting ... every once in a great while. Not so much as to become annoying, but they left the offer on the table. Then one week – more than thirty years later – that same couple they invited to church called them up and said, "We'd like to come to church with you this Sunday, if the offer still stands." And they went. How many of us would have given up? How many would have invited a neighbor in the first place?

How many would have bothered to pray faithfully through the years? Never give up. It's bad theology. If Christ is alive, his Spirit can give life anywhere.

The other attitude to avoid is pride. Sometimes when God gives success, we take credit. A preacher at the Beeson Pastors School last summer told a great story that illustrates this. A woodpecker spotted a tree that looked good, so he landed on it and prepared to do what woodpeckers do. Just as his beak hit the trunk for the first time, lightning struck the tree. With a mighty clap of thunder, it tore the tree in half and shattered it to splinters. The woodpecker flew back in awe and said, "Wow! Wait till I show the guys what I did!" The power is not yours. It is God's. The Holy Spirit gives life.

Ezekiel's vision shows us one more thing, and that is what I want to close with. It shows us the reason God's Spirit gives life. This is not only the reason God brought the exiles back to Judah, it is also the reason Jesus came among us and died on the cross, and it is the reason God calls you today. God says it twice in our passage, verse 6 and verse 13, "You shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord."

God wants you to live. We are all dead until the Holy Spirit breathes life into us. We are spiritually dead, and physical death is inevitable. The only way we can be alive is the Spirit of God. He gives us life by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus died so we can be forgiven. When you trust him, and give yourself to him, he pours his Holy Spirit into you and gives you life. He promises resurrection to eternal life, so your inevitable physical death doesn't matter. It's only temporary. And, he makes you spiritually alive now.

Once you belong to him, and his Spirit lives in you, you ought to feed on his Word and walk in the Spirit. We tend not to do that well. We have a rebellious streak that hangs on until our physical death. But we know the Lord. We know his power. And he is able to use people like us. His purpose is that we live and know him. He wants other to know him too. That's why he makes ministers of us all.

If you are getting discouraged in your ministry, if you see dry bones all around you, do not give up. Can these bones live? God knows. He has the power. Your part is to be faithful in the work to which he has called you. Give him your very best. Always remember the power is his. This means you have to pray. Be very specific in your prayers. And keep on praying.

You are a minister. Are you Ezekiel? If so, may you learn what he learned: God's Spirit gives life! Amen.