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**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

37:1 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.

37:2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

37:3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

37:4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

37:5 Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

37:6 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."

37:7 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.

37:8 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.

37:9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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."

37:10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

37:11 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.'

37:12 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.

37:13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

37:14 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.

**Meditation on the Word**

Have you ever been homesick? Really, really homesick?

Maybe you were away at camp and after the shock of the new place wears off, you realize you are not home anymore. The food is different. You have to live with all these new people, even temporarily. Mom and Dad aren't there. Maybe you feel withdrawal from wi-fi or the sounds of nature in the night are unfamiliar especially the hoot owl that wakes you up in the middle of the night.

Or maybe you have been in a new country, a new city, getting used to a new dorm. The sounds, smells, the people are unfamiliar. It takes awhile to settle in and feel at home. You feel like a stranger in a strange land. You are Homesick. Have you ever been homesick?

God's people felt homesick...a lot. From the expulsion out of the Garden of Eden to the Exodus from Egypt to the wandering in the wilderness to the Exile, God's people seemed to always be looking for Home.<sup>i</sup> (Three E's: Expulsion, Exodus, and Exile.) God's people knew what it was like to be far from home.

Today we read from the prophet Ezekial who has a vision from the Lord. The people of God are desolate and despairing refugees taken from their home. The Babylonian exile is in full swing. They are a conquered people wondering where in the world the LORD has gone. They feel God's judgment upon them in their desperation. They have lost their cherished institutions: the kingship and the Temple, the two things that kept their life together.

To say they have hit rock bottom is an understatement.

When all is lost we return to the ultimate source of our lives don't we? The people must turn to the LORD in order to live.

Ezekial's vision of the valley of dry, dead bones reminds us in the journey to the cross that we call Lent, that many are living in that same valley today. We are so ready to get to the triumph and victory of Easter Resurrection, but we have to go through a valley of dry bones first. So today we pause in the valley of death. We cannot ignore places like this where the love and the power of God are so very needed.

1. Consider the people of Syria who have endured war for six years. According to UN report over 11 million people have been displaced- 6 million people displaced internally and 4.8 million refugees living outside of their home country. I can only imagine how homesick and traumatized these people must be. The people are dry bones experiencing a living death. The Valley of Death is real.
2. Or closer to home, think about towns and communities that have dried up. We drove to Clinton, SC to visit Avery last Sunday afternoon. Like many small towns in SC, you can see the hollowed out textile mills, boarded up homes, and the empty businesses. Some parts of town look like a graveyard. It reminds us of a different way of life- a way of life that died with Textiles. That kind of poverty is a different kind of valley of death.
3. Or in our own backyard, recently a forum on the Clemson campus was held for international students. They were concerned, fearful even for their future because of the recent travel ban. Some students from the named and nearby countries are afraid to go home since they may not be allowed to return. Others are grieving because their families will not be able to travel here to see them graduate. That is another kind of homesickness.

When we place ourselves in the shoes of our neighbors we can imagine the exile that these neighbors feel. Because in the end we all are trying to get back home- to that place of security, peace, love and community. Maybe you feel that way right now.

When the LORD takes Ezekial to see the valley of dry bones with his own eyes, he sets him down right in the middle of the piles of bones. Ezekial is already feeling burnt out and struggling himself, weary with exile. When God asks Ezekial if these bones can live, Ezekial basically responds, "LORD, only you know!"

Only the LORD knows (not us). Ezekial surrenders to God and admits he doesn't know. Only you know, Lord, the hearts of the people (and I don't). Only you know if these dead bones can live again (and I don't). Only you know, Lord, the hurts and struggles of the people gathered in this sanctuary today (and I don't). Then God asks Ezekial to do something ridiculous- to speak to the dead bones.

*I imagine it's like standing up to preach to a crowd who has spent 12 hours the day before parking, tailgating, and attending a Saturday football game in Death Valley here!*

Ezekial probably thinks God is crazy to tell him to preach to a pile of bones, but kudos to Ezekial for trusting God to do God's thing. He obeys anyway. Ezekial still has a thread of faith. In these kinds of situations, we know that it is only the power of the Living God at work and nothing we have done. We simply speak, wait, and watch for what God is going to do to breathe new life and hope into the deathly situation.

Our job, our call, is to do God's bidding anyway, even if it looks beyond hope,

...even if we do not believe the intervention might not work

...even if we think our investment of time and love might not bear fruit

We are called to do God's bidding anyway. We are called to speak, to wait, and to watch for the power of God who brings life out of dead things because we trust in a God who overcomes death and the grave.

In the end, God gets the final word. And that Word became flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and dwells among us in Jesus, the Christ. And the God we know in Christ is a God of restoration and hope. The Spirit breathes new life into the church, into you and me, and says, "Speak my word, wait, and watch, I am doing a new thing. I will give you life, not just after death, eternal life, but here and now life, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Perhaps you have been through the valley of dry bones, and known that kind of despair. Perhaps you lived to see the other side. I hope so. If you are there now, know the Spirit intercedes on your behalf.

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My friend Anna Thomas McArthur writes a beautiful blog. Anna was Moderator of the Presbyterian Student Association in the mid-90s. She is a Presbyterian minister serving full-time in an important calling- motherhood. Perhaps you remember her brother, Miles Thomas, who worked as Fort Hill's youth director. Anna and her husband, Bryan, decided that one way they could really change the world was to adopt children who needed a home. They had two biological children, but knew they had the capacity to love more children. So on faith, they enthusiastically filled out the paperwork with the SC Dept. of Social Services. Being Christians, they felt they could handle anything with God's help, so they put that they had NO Criteria. They would take any child regardless of color, condition, or situation. They signed the paper work on Thursday. The next day they had a call to come to Charleston where twin girls had been born to an addicted mother. And one more thing... the girls were African American. Anna and Bryan are Euro-American. I mean really white. Katie and Elizabeth are great girls, even with some challenges imposed on them by their mother's addiction.

Raising two African American children has opened Bryan and Anna's eyes to a new reality that the McArthurs would not have known as white folk. Anna writes about love and family in her blog. ([www.lovemeansshowingup.com](http://www.lovemeansshowingup.com).)

A few weeks ago I was struck by a story where she recalled the tragedy of the hurricane Katrina disaster in New Orleans in 2004. As a mother of black children, she hoped the story was not true, but as a white person she said she knew it probably was. She learned that there were people stranded in a mixed income, mixed race condominium complex called the American Can Co. in Mid-City.<sup>ii</sup>

She writes, "There were about 170 residents left in the building, plus 75 people from the neighborhood seeking shelter because they were stuck. Many of the residents were elderly or handicapped or children. An 6'7" ex-Marine named John Keller used fire extinguisher powder to paint on the roof that they needed food and water. There were black people on the roof waving at the helicopters, hoping to be rescued. For days, helicopters would hover nearby, but wouldn't land. Then, John Keller had an idea to take all the black people off the roof and to put white people on the roof. This included white people in wheelchairs that they carried up to the roof. White people on the roof changed everything."

Within 15 minutes the helicopter landed and the pilot asked what the residents needed. Soon, food and water were falling from the sky. They had been left for dead, and now had hope. Surely the earlier helicopter pilots did not recognize her or his bias, but it was there. Because when white people were put on the roof, it changed the situation. John Keller's brilliant actions spoke louder than any words even the words he had painted with fire extinguisher. John Keller could have left and saved himself, but confessed it was the elderly and sick people for whom he stayed to help protect.

In a valley of death, where all around are dry bones, some of us who have to get up on the roof, to speak like Ezekial, to call people back to God's ways, and to wait and watch while the Spirit of God goes to work. God is a God of life- who wants well-being of all his children. It is our job to do God's bidding,

whatever our position, privilege, or God given gifts. We must speak when we see unfair practices that harm the least of these, those who are Christ himself Jesus tells us according to Matthew 25. We must speak up for the vulnerable: the elderly, the disabled, and children. We must speak out against racism. We must get up on the roof for those who have lost hope. Our words and our actions SPEAK. Just as our silence can speak.

For all of us, are looking for the same thing- a place to call home, a life. A place to feel alive and loved, safe, fed, and secure.

Hear the good news. Suffering is not the final word. The final word is God's, and God is love. God stands on the side of life, but

Sometimes we have to get up on the roof for the sake of each other.

Sometimes we have to go through a valley of death to see dead bones start to dance through power of God.

Just like we have to go through a graveyard to witness Resurrection.

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<sup>i</sup> Bartlett and Brown, eds., *Feasting on the Word*, p. 126

<sup>ii</sup> Elizabeth, Mueller, [blog.nola.com/elizabethmullener/2007/03/john\\_keller\\_was\\_hanging\\_out.html](http://blog.nola.com/elizabethmullener/2007/03/john_keller_was_hanging_out.html)=