

“Reconstituting Life”
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11;
John 11:1-45

April 2, 2017
Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow

‘Dem Bones’? When I think about this passage from Ezekiel, I always think about that song. The song makes it seem like such a wonderful thing but then you think about the actual image and it doesn’t seem so wonderful.

You know, Ezekiel is here talking to an exiled people. A people who have been driven out of Jerusalem and into Babylonian exile. They are not feeling too good. The description of them is as dry bones. It’s not just enough to be bones either, it’s dry. You gotta completely get rid of the life. And he is suggesting that God can still come into their lives. It is this image that stays with me. These dry bones. And if you’ve had an experience in life where there is a moment of feeling like it’s all dry bones, those moments in life where everything seems to have gone away, there is a hunger and thirst but you don’t know where or when there is going to be a change. It’s that image of being in the valley of dry bones that takes me back to those experiences, those moments, those ways of feeling where everything feels gone. Those moments of disorientation. It is into that kind of moment that Ezekiel is speaking. It is into that kind of moment in Lent. Lent just feels like it takes me to a place of dry bones, a place of dryness, a place of wondering what’s it all about? How’s it true? What can I hope in? There’s lots of ways to think about that. There’s this moment of despair that is described, and I’m not sure there is a much better description, than to be in a valley of dry bones. I feel like I’m one of those dry bones. I wonder about the world I live in and how it works and whether there will be life again.

It’s that interesting interplay between death and life that these passages are so full of. Ezekiel is describing a feeling of being dead, empty, dry. Paul goes on, when you put these verses together, and suggests that death is when we pay attention to the flesh. I always struggle with exactly what he means but perhaps it’s just the season of life that I’m in but it feel like I keep running into the idea that all there is, is the material world. All there is, is the flesh, the stuff. Sometimes it feels like the rest of everything history suggests there is, is thrown out. That we are just material beings living in a material world and the only way to enjoy the material world is to buy the next thing that will make us feel better. There are people out there writing popular books who suggest that we are “self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep up company and we are accountable to no one.” He goes on to say “Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied gods that don’t know what they want?” That seems exactly to me what Paul is talking about when we focus on the flesh, when we focus on just the material world. How are we going to know what we want?

What is life all about? It feels like if we don’t pay attention to more than that, are we more than the beating of our hearts and the brain waves in our heads. Maybe I’m just feeling this particularly because I keep bringing this up. Paul particularly here is suggesting that we are more than that. At the end of Ezekiel it says that God gives us the spirit which is life. I think our faith is all about life. It’s about who we can be and what we are and how we are more than just material beings. It’s not that we aren’t material beings but it’s a little bit like saying we are feet. That’s all we are. All we have to do is pay attention to our feet?

We are much more than that. That's what scripture is inviting us to recognize, we are much more than that. We are people who can see beauty. We are people who can love. We are people who can care for one another. We are people who can live in fellowship. It is the idea of spirit that gets us to think beyond, beyond our feet. And begin to think about what we are.

You know, as I read this scripture, especially as I read Paul or I read the end of Ezekiel, it is as life is breathed back in. It's not the bones. It's not the muscle. And, it's not the skin that really brings life. It's the breath. It's the spirit of God. God has given us life and invites us into it. Yet I know how hard it is in the midst of the moments of the dry bones to remember that. Or, in the myth of a world that tells us that all that is important is the next thing we buy or the next thing. But our scriptures invite to recognize that God calls us into life. That is what Ezekiel is doing: calling everyone into life. That is what Jesus is doing for Lazarus: calling him back into life. I think that's what this whole story is about: it's calling us into life. As we are called into life and given the spirit that enables our lives.

The interesting thing is how God continues to work here, what God does. Ezekiel becomes God's mouthpiece. You'd expect that Ezekiel could just stay there and watch what God is doing. But he tells Ezekiel to prophesy into the valley. God engages a human to do God's work. In some ways, that's the exact same thing he's doing in Jesus. He's coming in human form to engage us and do that work, to call us into life. So not only are we engaged in calling each other into life, letting God's word come through us and engage and call us into life.

I love what Jesus does at the end. As Lazarus comes out, he says, 'Unbind him.' That's what we do. That's what we get to do as a community. He calls us into life and invites us to be those who unbind one another. It feels to me what we are seeing here is not only that God has given us life and calls us into life but that we find the fullness of life when we unbind one another, when we live in community, when we gather together. It's what God does when he invites us to come to the table. It's not an invitation to be sustained physically but to gather as a people because life is full when we are in community, in relationships. It's what Paul is talking about, the spirit coming and the importance of allowing us to be in relationship with God.

God calls us into life to be in relationship with God and one another and invites us to be around the table in a world that would have us look a different direction, that would look at it being all about me and my life and my feelings and my experience and then discount the nature of my spirit, the human spirit. What is there to life if it isn't about the spirit and what the spirit does and the grace that comes through it and the aspirations that we share and the hopes we live into. So many ways communion is being called to life, life through the bread and the wine, a life that is made full in the sharing a meal together, the community. Again and again I hear that call into life and yet recognize that in my life there's that struggle to hear it, to allow God to be fully engaged in my life in a way that breathes God's spirit into me, into us. I guess I can think about coming again, and so often coming at the beginning of each month to communion is that call to life, to let God sustain us and make our lives full together.

You know, being a church is in so many ways counter-cultural because it's inviting us to be together, to fellowship, to expect that something will happen when we gather together and worship God. And, I think it does. The spirit is present and among us and moving and inviting us to be God's people, to drink in again the grace that God has given us and the hope that God puts before us.

I realize that it's easy to say but it only happens as we open our hearts, our hands, our arms and embrace the wonder of the gift that God has given us. So, I invite you to think about that as we come to communion today, opening our hearts, our minds, our arms to the God who would embrace us and lead us into life and engage us in unbinding each other, helping each other live. Amen.