

## Resurrecting Power

Menno Mennonite Church

March 9, 2020

Online Worship

**Purpose:** To explore the ways that God comes and is with us even in the moments of seeming death.

**Message:** As people of hope, we are invited to seek the sustaining hope of God with us, even at the point of the grave.

**Scripture:** Ezekiel 37:1-14

**Synopsis:** How often do we look on the world and our lives and see situations that remain beyond hope? All too well we know how we encounter circumstances that seem beyond help. It may be the circumstances of our lives that are beyond our control and beyond our help. We so readily feel the absence of the holy in our lives lacking as we do a language of God that allows God to be both be good and to be in the pain in our lives. We look at the dry places of our lives, and we wonder whether life can be found there again. We want God to supply what we need, to compensate us for what we lose, to prevent us from pain and loss in the first place. But that is not what we get. Instead we get a God who can be present in all circumstance and bring about new life in it all. And that indeed is good.

**Given the format, I will be leaning toward less is more, looking to not exceed 10-12 minutes. I assume a video attention span is about that.**

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14** <sup>NRS</sup>

The hand of YHWH came upon me,  
and brought me out by the spirit  
and set me down in the middle of a valley;  
it was full of bones.

<sup>2</sup> The Spirit led me all around them;  
there were very many lying in the valley,  
and they were very dry.

<sup>3</sup> YHWH said to me,  
"Mortal, can these bones live?"  
I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

<sup>4</sup> Then he said to me,  
"Prophesy 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<sup>1</sup> 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<sup>1</sup> 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 YHWH said to me,  
"Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal,  
and say to the breath:

<sup>1</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD:  
Come from the four winds, O breath,  
<sup>2</sup> 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.

As weird images goes, Ezekiel's valley of dry bones is right up there. That's saying something when talking about prophetic imagery given its rich, troubled history of fanciful notions and metaphorical demonstrations of the nature of the God-Israel relationship. Everything is a metaphor, pointing to something else, designed to grab the attention of the audience. There are no holds barred in speaking the word of the Lord, and this images of a land filled with the remains of the dead is no exception. Its creepy, disturbing, other-worldly, like something from a science fiction novel, and certainly not the place to pronounce a message of hope. Spoken to the broken people in Babylonian exile where Jerusalem has fallen, and the people disbursed, the nation of Israel must seem like some form of fantasy to most.

Despite its peculiarity, which is deep and wide, there is something familiar here too. Ezekiel's valley is not a specific geography, but it is familiar: the place where hope seems lost, where all that seems normal was come apart, where grief is on the breeze. We have all spent time here from time to time, where our lives, our hopes, seem beyond rescue, and our world has come apart at the seams. Some of us no doubt find ourselves there today. It is one of the most essential experiences of human experience, the experience of pain and desperation. Yet for all its universality, it is the most difficult places to be. Because each one's visit to this valley is unique. Each and every one of us come to this place convinced that we dwell there alone, convinced that we walk in the valley beyond any companionship, beyond any connection to those who are outside. There is nothing more isolating then the experience of pain, no matter what the source, and the best that we can do is try to find a way to put one foot in front of the other.

This is a beautiful, horrifying passage. Most of what we make of it is a snappy gospel tune, speaking of the word of the Lord. The reason why this is the only reference from Ezekiel that you hear with even passing frequency is that the rest of the book is even darker and more confusing than this. We forget that this is a community in exile who has been brutalized, tortured, seen the center of their faith brought to the ground—everything had fallen apart. Ezekiel is right in the middle of all of it, just as haunted by the circumstances as anyone else, just as wanting for new life as any of the people to whom he was sent to prophecy. "Can these bones live?" seems and impossible question, with only a ludicrous answer; "Only you

know, Lord' is what he says, but I have a hunch that is more because it is a rather bad idea to laugh in the face of YHWH than any profession of optimism on the part of the prophet.

We would answer this question of 'can these bones live' very simply. We would not have had them die in the first place. We would have had the divine prerogative to simply skip this valley entirely. We want a God who serves as a universal force field, cushioning our losses, reversing our failures, rescuing us from the need to grieve at all. We might believe in the resurrecting power of God, but that doesn't mean we want to try it for ourselves or see it up close. That would involve dying first. And that is scary. If we were the ones calling the shots, we would delete this place, these feelings from the human experience and find another way to operate. We want this so badly that we are willing to coordinate the presence of suffering with the theological righteousness of the person involved. But time and again, we are led to the vistas where life seems unlikely, or at least hard to see. We want the God who would allow us to detour around the valley. Instead we are given YHWH who comes down and dwells in the valley with us and says "even here, even now, I shall bring life again; I shall breathe new breath and you shall stand."

Instead of a God that would save us from dying deaths big and small, we have a God who would resurrect us from all that would lay us low. And that is good. God does away with death not by making it disappear, but by going through it instead. We have a God who goes through the world as it is *with us, around us, beside us*, showing us by example that the only way to get to Easter is by going through Good Friday first. These bones can live, yes, and they will live, says God. But they will be changed, and moved, and reanimated with Spirit and hope along the way. Because the world created with all its frightful beauty, and present pain is infused with my spirit, and it is in that Spirit that you will live, and move, and breathe, and trust, and grow more and more into the image that I have planted inside you even where you find yourself now. Pain is real. Grief is overpowering. But they will not have the final say. They will not be all that there is. My breath will blow, my hope will rise, and the world will be made yet again. Thus sayeth the Lord.

But what do we do in the meantime? How do we walk when we find ourselves crying out 'I am dried out and there is nothing left of me'?

First there needs to be acknowledgement that this is where we find ourselves, and this is how we might feel. Often, when we are faced with the challenges and disappointments of life, we take on the optimistic protestant work ethic and declare ‘by golly, everything is going to be swell’, and I just need to buck myself up. We don’t allow ourselves to confess what we fear, and where we find ourselves. Not that we need to dwell in the valley of bones, or necessarily need to own our hopelessness as the only state of our minds. Yet acknowledging ‘I am afraid; I still grieve; I feel alone; I am angry; I wonder if it will get better’ is important if for no other reason than it’s the truth. For all of us. It’s hard to do. We must acknowledge the pains of life that we all share if we are going to begin to imagine what it might be like for our deathly bones to live once again.

Second, we need to allow ourselves to feel the winds of the Spirit that are blowing in our lives and in the lives of others. We need to hear from each other the ways in which that which was broken was mended, the points of new life that spring forth in our midst. We need to look around and see the life in the midst of the disassembly, the sprouting where we might least expect it. We rejoice that we are connected, that we can worship together separately, that we have been given opportunity to manage the present crisis. We need to capture life where we find it because we need to see the movements of the Spirit in our midst. We need to see the leaves rustle and the grass bend, knowing the creating wind of the Spirit in our midst. We need to call out the evidence of the Spirit lest we miss presence when it is there. Find new life where you find it, in what ever way you find it, and treasure it, nurture it, share it and rejoice in it. You may find that when you look, you find life where you least expect it.

Third we must declare fully and finally that this valley, this deathly existence of ours that is always with us whether or not we are aware of it is not our home. Not to separate us in the by and by or to justify somehow suffering in this world for vindication in the next. But to simply be reminded that resurrection is our reality, fully and finally, that God’s restoration will come at the end of all things. That is promise: new life will come. Not as we would plan. Not as we would imagine. Not as we would schedule, but in time. We will be resurrected, not to what we are now, but to what we will be as God leads us through to what comes next.

What would we be like, our world be like, if we kept asking the question ‘Can these bones live?’ acknowledging our pain, calling out life where we find it, declaring resurrection as final reality? How might we live if we keep expecting the life giving breath of the Spirit even in the places we least expect?

We would be different people. A different church. A different world. God does not give us the rescue that we want; we get a resurrection instead. May we live into that gracious resurrection, even in the valley of dry bones, with sustained hope, and ever-present knowledge that God goes with us, even where we expect it the least.

God’s wind is blowing; may we be given the sense, the courage to set our sails and be moved.