

A Sermon by Nada Sellers, preached at First Church, Branford, CT on 4-2-17

## **"Never Too Dry"**

Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:1-6, 17-27

The passage of Scripture before us today could preach in the Darfur region of Sudan or in Rwanda... In many parts of Syria, and the Congo; in Afghanistan and certainly in Iraqi cities such as Baghdad, and Mosul and Fallujah. In yesteryear, this passage would resonate in the major western European cities that felt the destructive forces of the World Wars. This is a text that would reverberate within the cold walls of barracks and gas chambers and ovens at Auschwitz or Dauchau or Treblinka... Perhaps we could also find a chilling echo in the terror of Cambodia, in the devastation of genocide orchestrated by the Khmer Rouge and Pol Pot. Sometimes it's hard to fathom the depths of pain and suffering surrounding us in the world, in places far away or even closer, here at home. This book of prophecy, called Ezekiel, found amongst the Major Prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures in our Bible, does not try to hide the misery of real human tragedy. With dramatic and dreadful strokes, Ezekiel provides us with a message for people whose lives have been utterly disrupted; whose lands have been conquered, whose capital city and towns have been ravaged by conquering armies, and whose holy places of worship and sacrifice have been trashed.

Here is an extraordinary message for extraordinarily difficult times of hopelessness and confusion. It came to a prophet of the Lord, who lived in a refugee camp by an irrigation canal; to a priest whose temple and altars were in ruins.<sup>1</sup> It came to a proud patriot, whose native land was resettled by foreigners. It also came to a once proud people who now had no home, and no hope. And this is how the message was delivered: **READ EZ. 37:1-14 HERE.**

This is a text which proclaims the death and resurrection of God's people.<sup>2</sup> Rather than some comment about individual death and renewal, this is about the despair of a people who miraculously receive a message of renewal; not just about life after death, but life after the death of hope, life revived after plunging to the depths of despair. For not until the Holocaust of our time have the Jewish people known such crises as they experienced in the Babylonian exile. This man named Ezekiel, and perhaps three or more thousand leading Judean citizens, were among the exiles deported along with King Jehoiachin to be forcibly resettled by the Babylonians at Tel Abib. Struggling to come to terms with events of this first

deportation in 597 BCE, and the impending second deportation to occur later in 587, Ezekiel's words and actions tell of shock and bitterness, and of judgment for sin. Not until later, in the second portion of the book, are there words about hopes for a new, more wholesome day when Yahweh would again take up residence with his people in the promised land.<sup>3</sup> That's a whole different sermon!

But here, in the refugee camp, things were about as bad as they could be; in fact, they were worse. How could it be that the temple was destroyed and the presence of the Lord long gone from the nation? How could it be that the people had been stripped of the land long-promised to Abraham and Sarah? How could it be that the monarchy had been toppled, that the king from the house of David was no longer seated on the throne; what about God's promise of 'forever?' Where was God!? Did you ever ask this sort of question? The future wasn't simply a bleak one – it was a blank one, without possibilities for change or rescue. Did you hear how the people described themselves? Listen again: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." (v.11)

If there was ever a scenario of hopelessness, and absolute resignation, this is IT! And yet, here on the plain near the exiles' residences, God is about to do something impossible. Superimposed over this landscape of hopelessness, God reveals God's vision, a vision of renewed life for a people who have been acquainted with grief and death.

Maybe now it's possible to see why I said this text could preach in Darfur and Iraq and Cambodia and previously in Dachau. But what about here, in the United States of America in 2017? Can it preach here at First Congregational Church, in Branford, CT? It certainly can, for we are not strangers to corporate sorts of despair. We have our own landscapes of hopelessness, which we need to have revived by the word of God. We are people who dwell in towns and cities, and some of our communities have become disintegrating landscapes in decline. Our main streets – piles of debris in the gutters, piles of discards in shopping carts, piles of old clothes in a doorway, wrapped around the sleeping bodies of children without addresses, the moms and dads without doors or mortgages. The old, the poor, the mentally ill who have joined the single men, vying for a semi-safe spot to catch a few hours of sleep before the morning comes. Graffiti no longer confined to restroom stalls in public schools or libraries, now scrawled on buildings, bridges, buses, park benches, anything within reach and in sight of the public. Yards unkempt, paint peeling, drain spouts drooping, discarded furnishings and automobiles... The pathos of perennials fighting their way through the trash

and the weeds and the overgrown grass, to bloom again, defiantly. Oh yes, we have our aging architecture, our decaying infrastructures, disintegrating civil services, expansive prison-building, under-funded schools and floundering social systems in the midst of our unsteady tax bases. Just describing the ragged aesthetics of it drags me down... The grayness, the messiness, the dismal shabbiness; it's so overwhelming to consider.<sup>4</sup>

It's not just our towns and cities and neighborhoods which struggle for survival and hopefulness. Let's be open about our own story, in this house, between these aging walls. An awareness of our own areas of decline, along with the strain of trying to maintain as well as reorganize is etched in our consciousness. In our 300 hundred-plus-year-old church, not just in our town but throughout sister churches in nearby New England cities, there are more and more graying heads in the pews and pulpits, fewer infants in the cradles and playpens, just a few children in Sunday Schools and even fewer youth involved at all. The church is, of course, to be a place of support for those with graying hair, but it is also to put out a fresh welcome mat for those with brown and red and blond and black hair as well. Where have we drifted astray? Aren't we doing what we thought we were taught to do? What is the word of the Lord and what of the vision of hope? What are the words of prophecy, what will be transposed upon that familiar but discomfoting landscape called the three-hundred-and-seventy-three-year-old church? "Where there is no vision, the people perish..." intones the wisdom of Proverbs. (29:18)

Yet into these landscapes comes the vision that God would have us see; into these settings God calls us to prophesy just as Ezekiel was called, raised up one day to take a walk amongst a field of bones. God calls us, you and me – unless we have no words from the Lord to speak, unless there are simply too many bones, that are far too dry, and we are overcome by the scenery, overwhelmed with the dimensions of the challenge. Unless we have withdrawn ourselves from our world, and made for ourselves a comfortable niche apart... Unless we do not own the landscape, and do not look up for the inspired words to speak, or listen for the wind of the Spirit which blows across the plain.<sup>5</sup> What can we learn from this prophet's vision? What prophetic words might rattle in our ears this morning, on our journey? What message are we going to take with us?

The place to which the prophet was brought by God, was a plain near his own dwelling place, amongst the Jewish exiles. For any of you who have seen pictures from the death camps of Nazi Germany, you can recall the piles of bones, long past being skeletons,

simply piles of bones in mass graves. I am remembering the sight of pictures at the Simon Weisenthal Museum of Tolerance in downtown LA... lifeless dry bones, hundreds of thousands of them, discarded and strewn about. The Lord causes Ezekiel to wander about on this plain full of loose bones, very dry and very dead. This is a place full of impossibility and impotence; many, many people were once amongst the living, and here, are irrevocably amongst the dead. Can you picture the bones bleached by the sun which always figured so prominently in desert scenes of old western movies?

Once a full tour of the abandoned, disassembled skeletons has been made by the prophet, God pops the biggest question of all: "Well, mortal one, can these bones live again?" Can they? Can there be life in this field full of very dry bones? No. Not if empirical evidence counts for anything. Can our towns and cities live again? Can our churches? Ezekiel is very aware that he is not alone in that valley; the hand which brought him there belongs to the God who can move in the power of the Spirit. No way can these bones live again, no way! Unless... unless what? Unless God wills it to be. The prophet's ambiguous reply acknowledges that God is the only one able to respond: "Oh Lord God, **you** know." This is the safest reply possible, but also a faithful one. This prophet affirms his belief in a God who gives life and takes it away, (Dt. 32:39), the God who can restore the dead to life, if God so chooses, even when starting with a pile of dry bones.<sup>6</sup>

This is precisely what Yahweh God proceeds to do: Post-haste the prophet is given a message to preach to the dry bones: "O bones, hear the word of the Lord... with sinews, skin and breath you shall live again." Talk about unexpected!: In the first person narration of our prophet, one cannot help but notice the stunning role he plays in helping to bring life back to this landscape: He says these words, and immediately, the bones begin to rattle, the silent valley is full of noises, as the bones as far as he can see, begin to move about! In sight and sound Ezekiel's senses are bombarded with the impossible now happening. Once skeletons are reassembled, sinews of tendons and ligaments appear, and muscles ripple red and pink in the sun; and then there is skin covering everything, just like the first creation account. With the Creator, as a co-creator, the prophet is now confronted with a valley full of bodies, corpses mind you, for though fully formed, they are without the quickening of breath. We would be remiss if we did not notice how the need for a second step – calling upon the Spirit wind to give life-giving breath – is a step that closely mirrors the Genesis story of earth creatures who received God's breath. First God has called on the prophet to assist in the

task of reforming bones into bodies, and now the second step calls for the renewal of breath. This word "breath" also translated "spirit" and "wind," is found ten times in our passage just in case there's any doubt in our minds; the text seems to emphasize how utterly dependant life is upon the divine spirit. Without it, the refitted bones remain corpses; with it, the bodies rise up from the floor of the plain, vivified, breathing, alive, a vast multitude, the newly reconstituted Israel!<sup>7</sup> Hand in hand, this prophetic word from the Creator, to be uttered by the prophet in the barrenness of a lifeless landscape, leads to life! The message of the vision to the people living in exile on the plain was clear: The God of the promised land, is as close to you as your very breath. The same God who in the beginning made life out of nothing, can make living beings out of dry bones! ***You cannot, you must not, you dare not rule God out.*** God can reform and renew... Never **ever count God out.**<sup>8</sup>

Well, friends, as I said earlier, what could be the visionary message for us today, waiting here upon the Holy One? Living in the midst of our own frustrated hopes or discomfoting realities, can we hear the prophetic voice and can it revive us too? To be people of the Spirit, to receive and deliver the prophetic word as the Body of Christ, the church, we must get in touch with the presence of God, a presence which Ezekiel knew was with him. We too must be people of prayer, people with open ears and eyes, and hearts, people ready to respond to any new message the God of life would give us, even if we are told to preach to dry bones!! If we would welcome warm, living, breathing bodies into this church building, if we would see new life around us in towns and cities and schools and libraries and hospitals, it needs to start here, with us. Look no further than yourself, and the person sitting next to you. Is there more to our relationships than Sunday mornings and committee meetings? Are we called to be a community where the lively presence of God invigorates and inspires us to try new things, and to reach out with the confidence that this new life in Jesus, is something God wants for everybody?

God's decision to raise up a people, and to reconstitute a chosen nation, finds its ultimate climax in the person and work of Jesus: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," Jesus says, "because he has anointed me, to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind..." (Lk 4:18-19) It is this Jesus who calls Lazarus forth from the dead, out of the grave, restoring his breath and bringing him back to life and to his family. What is it Jesus could do here, in our midst, as we're willing to follow

his lead? Where has our journey of Lent brought us as we approach the cross and then the empty tomb? Let me share this observation:

To be bearers of God's prophetic word about Jesus, is to be willing to ask ourselves about how are we sharing of ourselves and our time as co-creators: What spirit invigorates us, and is it building up Christ's church? When is the last time you've felt able to shout out, "Amen!?" How about having the courage to raise up your hands in praise or to reach out with love in Jesus' name? If it's been awhile, we need to ask ourselves some hard questions, the kind God asks, "Mortal one, can these bones live?" God wants ALL of us, friends, not just one or two or three bones, but all of us, bones, muscle, flesh, blood and all. This is what the Spirit of God is about: inspiring even the driest of bones, rejuvenating even the scattered remains of the now lifeless opportunities that we once thought would move us forward to better days. God can do what God has done before. Let's claim this vision of Ezekiel's as our own: things are never too dry for God to get something started! Amen.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> J. Blenkinsopp in *Interp. Ezekiel* (John Knox Press, 1990):8.

<sup>2</sup> D. Gowan *Ezekiel; a Fox Preaching Guide* (John Knox Press, 1985):123.

<sup>3</sup> R. Klein *Ezekiel; The Prophet and His Message* (Univ. of S. Carolina, 1988):5-11.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from a sermon by Rev. Claudia Rowe entitled "Never too Dry, Never too Dead" preached at Knox Preb. Church on 2-29-95. Numerous aspects of this sermon are reflected in NS' effort; special thanks to Claudia for sharing her thoughts with me.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Gowan, p. 124.

<sup>7</sup> Klein, p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> C. Rowe as cited above.

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