

## **The Spirit in Ezekiel**

A prompting offered by Rev. Dr. Michael D. Castle  
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Cross Creek Community Church, United Church of Christ  
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### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

*“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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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.’”*

*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. 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. Then he said to me. ‘Prophecy to the breath: prophecy, 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.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

*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.’ Therefore prophecy, 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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.’”*

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***“Then [God] said to [Ezekiel], ‘Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.’”***  
*Ezekiel 37:4-5*

Of all the books of the prophets, none is as odd and foreign to a contemporary reader as Ezekiel. His unusual visions, his strange behavior, and his prophetic oracles are almost beyond comprehension. Ezekiel's actions have been described as going all the way from the bizarre to the grotesque. His visions are graphic and his prophetic actions are, well, weird. His call to be a prophet came in this way: *“In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God.”*

Visions are one thing. Actions are another. Ezekiel just didn't have visions. He also acted out in strange ways in order to bring his visions and their message to life. Ezekiel's message was largely one of doom and destruction and judgment. He saw the end coming for Jerusalem long before anyone else could see it; long before anyone else would name their denial; long before anyone else was willing to pay attention. He saw the end results of idolatrous practices that legitimated military alliances, violent crimes and oppressive economic policies.

And I tell you, when I hear Ezekiel's message, I shudder. I shudder at our own country's blindness and denial to our own idolatrous practices still grounded in war and military action as means to solve problems; still grounded in our participation in economic oppression and greed.

NCR's move to Atlanta, in my opinion, is one more painful example of how out of touch and disconnected America's corporate CEO's and boards are to local communities and how their own practices and greed can support economic oppression and devastation. I am yet to hear a compelling argument as to why their World Headquarters needs to move to Georgia, except Bill Nuti wants to start again in Atlanta. But why would he care about Dayton? He's never lived here. (And if you haven't figured out by now, Yes, I am angry!)

In attempts to explain Ezekiel people have diagnosed him with all sorts of mental illness and called him “abnormal.” But who is to say what is “normal” in a person’s relationship with God? It seems to me that it is far better to simply state that Ezekiel’s experience of God is far *different* from any of the other Hebrew prophets.

Ezekiel’s name means “God strengthens.” He was a priest, the son of Buzi. He was a Hebrew who was taken captive by the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar and hauled into exile in Babylon. His devotion to God was such that he was willing to make a fool of himself again and again in order to get his message across. He was deeply in love with his people. So much so, that he entered into and shared their sufferings.

The popular theology of his day claimed that the defeat of a people was equal to defeat of their god. Ezekiel said that it was not so. The defeat of Judah was not a defeat for God. Rooted in his preaching is a theology of exile. God was working through Israel’s suffering and exile, not apart from it. And while a large part of Ezekiel’s words are doom and gloom, judgment and destruction, he is still able to articulate a word of hope and possibility. I am always amazed by the prophets – and Ezekiel is no exception – because in spite of the weighty circumstances of life, and no matter how difficult life may have been, there always appears this word of grace and steadfast love: Do not be afraid, do not give up “A new heart I will give you; A new spirit I put within you.” (Ezekiel 11:19; 36 :26-27)

To even begin to understand Ezekiel you have to understand exile. Ezekiel is a prophet of the exile. Exile is that sense of being displaced and removed from once familiar securities and certainties. In 598 and again in 587 B.C.E. the political power of Israel collapsed. Yes, what was unthinkable happened. Jerusalem, with its cherished Temple, fell into the hands of the Babylonians. And some of the Israelites were taken off to Babylon. They were not so much harshly treated. That was not the problem. Rather, they did feel enormously displaced. The ground had literally shifted under their feet. They were in exile.

So let’s pause long enough to identify. I suspect feeling in exile is not foreign to your experience, or mine. In some way you feel displaced, out of step, not at home. It’s a familiar place to be really. Within a job you can feel in exile – when you can no longer be yourself and offer your best. Certainly without a job you feel that, passed over, not wanted. In any organization, where you once felt at home, you can feel in exile. Once you belonged, now there is no longer a fit. In our political party...in our governmental policies...in our neighborhoods we can feel out of step, alienated, displaced. With someone important you can feel in exile. The ground beneath your relationship can shift and you both begin to act like strangers. Even in a family, yes, most painfully in your family, you can be in exile, feeling the loss of honest exchange, mutual respect and appreciation. No one feels always at home.

Here at Cross Creek I am constantly hearing stories of exile. I’m thinking of women and their disappointments and struggles to be faithful to their call as women in ministry. I’m thinking of many among us and their struggles to be gay and Christian. I’m thinking of a few transgender folks among us who have lived for so long in exile to their true gender identity. I’m thinking of others who have experienced injustice through racial intimidation and overt racism. I’m thinking of others who are struggling with physical limitations and frightening illnesses and diagnosis, or the unsettling grief of losing someone loved. I’m thinking of others who hunger for a credible Jesus and a meaningful Christian spirituality, desperately trying to take back the Christian faith from those who have made it into a list of beliefs that are improbable at best and useless for daily living.

Upon offering the winning bid at the service auction last year to name a sermon topic, Teresa Lowen asked that I simply preach from the Book of Ezekiel. And in telling me why she liked Ezekiel so much, she named her own story of exile in her struggle with bipolar disorder. I have included her words on the front of our bulletin. Teresa’s offers us more words, another story, of exile.

Can you hear it now? The tune is exile. Teresa’s story, like so many others, is just a different verse. “Same tune, different verse,” they say! Over and over again, stories of woundedness and displacement are told at Cross Creek. Stories of exile. Exile happens. No one stays at home, feels at home, all the time. Our temples of stability fall, our security blankets are ripped from our hands; our certainties about God, about people, about life and health crumble. We have to learn to live in exile. It’s a recurring experience.

And to this condition Ezekiel shares his vision – how to live in exile.

But the first word is this: You can die in exile.

People die in exile all the time. The picture Ezekiel draws is vivid, stark. The exiled Israelites are painted as dry bones in a valley. Bones all over the place. Dry bones. Dead bones. A disconnected bone is worthless. A separated bone becomes dry and lifeless. Bones are meant to connect. And an important part of Christian spirituality and practice is surely to confront the current cultural ideal of individual independence. The goal of separate, private, self-sufficient living is deadly. “I,” apart from “we,” becomes a dry bone.

Much of contemporary art makes this point. For instance, Samuel Beckett, in the play, *Happy Days*, dramatizes this truth. Winnie is a character, a woman of about 50. In the first act Winnie is buried in sand up to her waist. But she chatters away, brushes her teeth, rummages through her handbag, and interacts with her husband. In the second act she is buried up to her chin. She is out of touch with people, yet the stream of idle chatter continues. She is content to keep going through the motions. Winnie is disconnected. She is a picture of death – existing, but not living in significant relationships.

In my estimation, much of the Church of Jesus has become the church of Winnie. Going through the motions, chattering on, self-occupied but totally out of touch with real human experience, still thinking about God and people and life like ancient, pre-modern people did while living in a thoroughly modern and increasingly post-modern world.

And it's not just the Church. Our world is full of Winnies, too, going through the motions of living, up to our necks in the sand of self-preoccupation. It's deadly. Out of touch, we can settle into a sameness and a boring existence. Death means the loss of inspired response, the loss of our capacity to feel the pain or glory of the other. Death means being alone, then wanting to be alone. Yes, you can die in exile!

But hear a second word. You can live in exile.

You know the old African-American spiritual: “The toe bone's connected to the foot bone...and the foot bone's connected to the ankle bone...and the ankle bone is connected to the leg bone...” Perhaps Ezekiel was way ahead of his time. As I mentioned last week, more and more, thoughtful leaders and scholars, especially physicists, are discovering how totally interconnected our world is. Reality is marvelously interrelated. One has called it a “luminous web.” We're becoming increasingly aware that we live in a world where everything has an effect on everything else. President Obama's speech in Cairo this past week is a reminder to America and to the world that this is so. Unfortunately, so many of us in America just don't want to hear it, don't want to wake up to this reality. We live in a global world and whether we like it or not, we are connected to each. We live in a relational world. We are part of a grand, interlocking network. And what a dancing world it is!

For example, just now you and I are being affected by limitless stimuli – like the atmosphere of this room; like the cross on the wall. We are spilling over into each other's lives. By now you and I are literally breathing each other's breath. You are different because of the mood and attitudes of the ones sitting around you. You are affected by the weather outside. On and on. The words spoken, the way they are spoken, the memories ignited. I could name a multitude of influences upon us. But this is the Good News word for living in exile...connection. You need not be alone in exile. You survive and thrive through connection. A wind blows, a breath whispers, a linking-up spirit is present, connecting you with other dry bones, creating a living organism – together in pain and joy, together in possibilities and differences, together in the work of justice and peace, together in sin and forgiveness. Vital connection...life-giving community...

Now you may have wanted more. You may have wanted your exile eliminated. You may have wanted me to offer a sure-fix solution for your problems. You may have wanted safety. You may have wanted a pain free solution. But that's not the promise. That's not our hope. No, the anguish of being out of step, out of sync, out of place may well remain. It did for Israel for a long, long time. Ezekiel's vision is that, while in exile you need not be alone, you need not be dead, you need not be without hope. The Spirit of God is alive and well and at work in the world, connecting you creatively to the one next to you. God is that awareness that we are in this church together; in life together. God is that courage to open up, to reach out, to come out, to be the image of God you were created to be. God keeps on speaking and calling...connecting the ankle bone to the leg bone...and the leg bone to the hip bone. Count on it!

And isn't that like Jesus? In him we see so clearly the God who speaks in new ways and the connecting up Spirit at work among people in exile. Displaced persons kept coming to life. Zaccheus...Mary Magdalene...Matthew...those nameless Samaritans and Romans and Jews...lepers and prostitutes... the lonely rich and the lonely poor. And what did they have in common? They felt exiled, out of place, out of step with the culture around them – both political and religious. And Jesus offered not ease. Jesus offered relationship. Jesus offered a new community. He offered the life of being vitally connected with one another and in tune with the Still Speaking, Still Breathing, Still Blowing God. From dry bones he formed a body, a living vibrant community of disciples...what we often refer to as the body of Christ. Could this be a guiding vision for why we are still church today? I sure hope so.

Ezekiel, depressed and feeling hopeless, grieving over the exile of his people Israel, so few in number, a tiny shadow of their former greatness now eking out a grim existence in Babylonian captivity, far from the once majestic Jerusalem now in ruins, has a vision of dry bones. How descriptive of the way we feel when death imposes upon us, kills our dreams, attacks what we have worked so hard to build: *“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”* (Ezekiel 37:11) A valley of dry bones!

*“Can these bones live?”* God asks Ezekiel. *“God knows,”* he says, seemingly without much feeling, without much hope.

But God tells Ezekiel to preach to the dry bones, and he does. And lo and behold, the wind begins to stir, and those bones start rattling, connecting with each other. They leap up and start dancing, flesh grows upon them, and suddenly they are breathing and singing and shouting, a multitude praising God.

Hey friends, this is my kind of text! This is a preacher's kind of text! And week after week I look over a valley of dry bones, faces weary with working hard for little visible result, eyes anxious with uncertainty about the future in your jobs, in your family, in the world. Heads bowed, not in reverence, but defeat, barely alive, wracked with signs of aging, illness, dis-ease, fears, angers, hurts of all kinds; relationships so fragile that God only knows if you will be together next week; everywhere signs of death and dying, everyone grappling with mortal terror in one form or another. But my job is to stand before you and

*Preach to these bones and say to them: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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.”*

Even though we live in exile, facing death, wrestling with it, I get to remind us to wake up, to pay attention to that connecting up Spirit at work in you and among us, to look alive there, to extend the arms of extravagant welcome to those who are different from you, to ask together the hard questions about our certainties and our doubts, to take the risks of faith, to do the work of justice and peace, to worship in spirit and truth, to dare to make a difference in the world, to be vulnerable in love and passionate and engaged. And maybe I don't have to tell you that. Maybe you already know that. But we forget that sometimes, don't we, so it bears repeating!

And let me tell you this, I'm just as amazed as Ezekiel when God gives life to our valley of dry bones. The Spirit of God is in the place and we will walk out of here newly alive, with energy and courage to face death down, to speak out, to dream the dream of God's realm again and again, to act up for what is just and right and loving, and to testify to God's Still Speaking Presence in the world. And somehow, not because of me, and not because of any one of you, but by the grace of God, we keep listening for God, we raise our sails trusting that God's Spirit will blow, we keep on going. And somehow...somehow...we get enough people and money and energy to do what God calls us to do.

Brothers and sisters, this is a mighty vision and a hopeful possibility for abundant life in the Spirit:

*“I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live...and...suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.”*

That sounds like communion to me.

That sounds like Good News to me.

That sounds like our Story...and I'm sticking with it!