

Dry Bones
Preacher: Rev. Karen E. Gale
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45:55

Dry Bones
Ezekiel 37:1-14

I'd like you to try something with me. Take a deep breath...hold it in... come on... keep it up... there are only 15 minutes of the sermon left to go...

Ok, ok, you can breathe. But you know what, apparently, when you feel deep stress, you breathe very shallow breaths. You don't get the oxygen you need. We don't truly breathe.

Sometimes we forget to breathe, to really breathe, to breathe deeply. We go from task to task, from stress to stress, from activity to activity, from need to need, from bad news to worse news. And before we know it, we are out of breath, not because we are running too hard (though we may be chasing our tail), but because we have lost the life-giving real breath we need. We are out of breath. Out of life. Dry bones.

Today we read from Ezekiel. Who? Ezekiel was a prophet in the 6th century BCE. It was the time of the Babylonian exile. All the leadership of Judea, the southern part of what had been King David's united Israel, had been led off to exile in shackles.

Unlike his counterpart the prophet Jeremiah, Ezekiel has been led into exile, as well. He has been:

--taken from the sight of the rubble, the ruin, the devastation of a conquered nation

--taken from the body of his wife who died during the fall of Jerusalem

--taken from his home into bondage

His ministry was to those who were in exile with him.

In our reading for today, Ezekiel has a vision, one of four visions described in the book Ezekiel. Ezekiel says, "the hand of the Lord came upon me" and describes how Ezekiel is then standing in a wide, long valley. The whole desert, as far as the eye can see in every direction, is filled with white bones of long dead young men.

This valley was the place of the contest between the Babylonian and Judean armies. Babylon was the strongest nation in the region, a huge army with vast resources. Judah was so small, the army was a mere fraction. It was no contest and Judah's army got wiped out. All the young warriors were killed and their bodies left sprawled out on the desert sands as far as the eye could see in all directions, not buried but just left there in the sun

God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel replies essentially, "why are you asking me, you're the one who knows!"

God then charges Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to share the word of the Lord.

"I will cause the breath or spirit to enter you and you shall live."

And Ezekiel prophesied and "there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. There were sinews on them...and flesh had come upon them and skin had covered them but there was no breath in them." The bones had been put back together but there is no life in them, no breath, no spirit.

Can these bones live?

Two years ago I came to Pilgrim as your intentional interim pastor. In my first month I did a lot of listening as you all came to me worried, sometimes in tears, sometimes angry, often with questions, the biggest of which was, "can Pilgrim church live?" You all were in a period of dry bones. There had been conflict. People had left. There were secrets. There was a lack of trust. There was little joy. "Can these bones live?" you asked.

In my very first worship service with you I held up this mirror and I said, "take a look, Pilgrim people. What do you see? I will tell you what I see and you can decide for yourselves. Do you all want these bones to live." And, here's the important part, were you willing to look honestly in the mirror and make the changes needed to bring life back to these bones of Pilgrim church?

Can these bones live?

What did you see on that first Sunday? And what do you see now?

The rest of today's Ezekiel text has God promising 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. 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."

Initially we might think this passage is about resurrection, but it's not. It is a question about restoration, a question of reaffirming God's promise of presence and power, the promise made to Abraham, to Moses, to David, to Jesus, to Pilgrim, to you, to us. God says, "I will strengthen you, I will uphold you, I will shelter you, I will be with you. I will send my spirit upon you."

In times of desperate disbelief, despair, despondency, we ask if God can breathe life into the dry bones of our lives and reanimate them. Can these bones live? Will we allow it?

It takes work. It is hard, bone-deep hard, to release what has gone and learn to start again. To forgive. To mourn a passing, to say goodbye, to let go of how things have always been. To allow empathy for one another to grow. To open up and let God have enough room to breath on those dry bones and bring life again. A different life. And to then walk with God into that brave new world.

And it's not like it has been an easy couple of years in our world either. The climate crisis is readily apparent now. There has been a huge rise in acts of racism and anti-Semitism. The border is a mess. Our US government has been in a constant state of chaos. Even this week we have a new bombshell and looming impeachment fight.

When we look at our country, and nations around the world that are struggling--the UK, Venezuela, Austria--we wonder, can these bones live?

God commands Ezekiel again to prophesy: "Come from the four winds, o Breath, o spirit, and breath upon these that they may live."

God is speaking about the restoration of the people, the fulfillment of God's promises, that God will put God's ruah, God's spirit, God's breath, into the people and they will live.

Restoration is about the return of God's spirit to us, the enlivening, making us live again, in the spirit of God. Restoration is renewal of life within community, not individual but collective. Restoration brings back to principles of God into our lives, not promising us to recreate what was, but offering us what can be. God's vision of what should be.

And you know what? That's what I see here, now, at Pilgrim. Restoration. Restoration of relationships. Restoration of faith in your Council and leadership. Restoration in your understanding of your covenant with the UCC. Restoration in your understanding of your partnership with your pastor.

Can these bones live? Yes. Yes, they can. Yes, they are. Yes, you are.

There will still be bumps in the road. Of course. Life is not smooth. The life of the church is not either.

There will still be lots of change.

There will still be conflict. Remember: conflict is just the presence of conflicting ideas. It is not to be feared but rather waded into.

Your next pastor, and the one after that, and the one after that, will inspire you and disappoint you. They will work side by side with you and call you back into covenant with one another.

And God's presence will abide with you.

Finally, know that as I look out on this congregation I see love and joy and commitment to find what God is calling you to do in this place and beyond. I have loved you dearly, Pilgrim folks. And you have loved me back. Thank you for that. I will miss you. And I will take a peek every once in a while at the website to see what you are up to. And, if you come to regional UCC events, we will likely bump into one another. (Yes, that's a blatant plug for you to get more involved in the UCC and go to Super Saturday and the Conference annual meeting!)

So, with me, breathe deep. Breathe deep.

Let the breath of God, the spirit of God, fill you. Let the spirit of God renew the places of your dry bones. Rejoice in the breath of God that fills this church and gathers us together in life and hope and joy and challenge.

Let God breathe the breath of life and of renewing spirit into this beloved community that you may believe in what shall arise anew, that God is not finished with you, with us, with Pilgrim, with our world.

Can these bones live?

God says, "yes. Oh, yes!" Thanks be to God.

Amen.