

Rebuilding

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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March 22, 2026

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.

**2**

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive

to the voice of my supplications!

**3**

If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

**4**

But there is forgiveness with you,

so that you may be revered.

**5**

I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

**6**

my soul waits for the Lord  
more than those who watch for the morning,  
more than those who watch for the morning.

**7**

O Israel, hope in the LORD!  
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,  
and with him is great power to redeem.

**8**

It is he who will redeem Israel  
from all its iniquities.

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. **2** He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. **3** He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." **4** Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. **5** Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath[a] to enter you, and you shall live. **6** I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath[b] in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD."

**7** 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. **8** 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. **9** Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath:[c] Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath,[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” **10** I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

**11** 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.’ **12** 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. **13** And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. **14** 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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*O Lord God, you know.*

The valley of dry bones is a metaphor that resonates with the moments when we feel dry and brittle, burnt out and done. The moments we feel useless, or abandoned, or lacking in hope. You’ve been there. Your organizations have been there. Seven or eight years ago this congregation was even there (I found Karen Gale’s sermon on this text).

Ezekiel, priest to the exiles, said: these dry bones shall live. “To a helpless and hopeless people he brought hope of restoration to a homeland and temple by their just and holy God.<sup>1</sup>

O Lord, you know, Ezekiel said. And God’s response to a people in exile came: I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.

I will put my spirit within you, and *you shall live*.

I want you to hold on to that good word - it surely means something for each of you, and for our church - I want you to hold on to that good word as we travel, one more time this Celtic Lent, to the Island of Iona.

Ezekiel’s testimony can be retold through the story of Iona. Iona is a place, but more so, it is a community. The story of Christians there, fifteen hundred years old, can be told through building and ruins and rebuilding. Through building community, and centuries of dry bones, and the choice to rebuild a community.

(Note that the following history is drawn largely from Ronald Ferguson’s *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community*.)

Columba and his twelve followers arrived from Ireland in 563 and established a monastery which served as a base for missions all over Scotland. That first community was not a stone cathedral, just a simple place where the monks lived in Celtic Christian style even as Roman Christianity grew up around them. The missions from Iona continued for hundreds of years.

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<sup>1</sup> The New Interpreter’s Bible

In 806 the Vikings came and slaughtered 68 monks at what is still called Martyrs' Bay, and the rest of the monks fled for their lives, back to Ireland, to Kells and Dunkeld and Downpatrick.

But Iona, the thin place, was revered by kings - Scottish, Norwegian, Irish, French, they were all buried on Iona's "Street of the dead" even when there were few people praying there. Dry bones indeed.

The high stone crosses came in the 10th century, and in the 13th century, a new church - an Abbey of stone - was built by the Benedictines (so now Iona was Roman). The Reformation came and it was dry bones again, the monks all disbursed but a few Protestants stayed. In the 17th Century a bishop, a Campbell, rebuilt the Abbey and then there were Campbells and McLeans, back and forth, in charge for a while.

In the 18th century pilgrims came to the holy island to "linger in the ruins" and by 1899 George Douglas Campbell, 8th Duke of Argyll, restored the Abbey Church as a gift entrusted to the Church of Scotland but with a condition: all Christians were invited to worship here, Protestant *or* Catholic. The sanctuary had new life breathed in.

But the monastery was still in ruins.

You have to know the first 1400 years of history to appreciate what happened next.

George McLeod was the same age as Columba when he came to Iona in 1938. From a storied and privileged family, a decorated World War I veteran who had become a pastor, and a pacifist, he came to

Iona in the middle of the Great Depression. “He organized a mission of friendship.”<sup>2</sup>

It was the Depression, and Rev. MacLeod saw economic deprivation all around. “He was aware of...the two nations of his country - the rich and the poor.”<sup>3</sup> He saw “the wastage of human skills which mass unemployment brought”<sup>4</sup> and believed that “painstaking service to human kind’s most material needs is the essence of Christian spirituality.”<sup>5</sup> The Church, MacLeod thought, wasn’t living out its mission, and “radical changes were needed if the church was to speak a word to the modern world.”<sup>6</sup>

The Church needed to address, in concrete ways, the human needs of the day. And George MacLeod knew two groups of people to try an experiment in rebuilding the dry bones of Church, in a physical place that also needed rebuilding. Bringing together unemployed craftspeople and young pastors to learn the needs of their neighbors, an intentional community was built even as the dry bones of the Abbey came back to life.

They found - as Iona still sings - “in work and in worship, God is with us.” They prayed together twice a day in the Abbey church, and they slept outside while building back the dormitory, refectory, library, and grounds. They built a Community “in continuity with the Columban and Benedictine communities”<sup>7</sup> but with a new mission and purpose. And they prophesied to the Church throughout Scotland. “The essentially individualistic nature of Christianity [as] presented in the

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<sup>2</sup> Ferguson, p. 50

<sup>3</sup> John Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, p. 77

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, p. 50

<sup>5</sup> John Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, p. 79

<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, p.51

<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, p. 55

19th and 20th centuries was seen to be inadequate.”<sup>8</sup> The Community being formed at Iona Abbey sought the common good, “sharing life and its resources in a spirit of interdependence.”<sup>9</sup> They would be Christian *in the world*. They saw “prayer and political action equally important facets of discipleship....only a practical form of Christianity would do.”<sup>10</sup> There were issues, of course. No women were allowed at the beginning. The pacifists and non-pacifists were in conflict. And then, the big issue: World War II. Somewhere in those years the Community transformed yet again, with members serving in the war and ministering in urban areas but staying bound to Iona in a rule of life.

Years later, in the last prayer he wrote, George MacLeod asked: “Strengthen us to go on in loving service of all thy children. Thus shall we have community with thee, and in thee, with our beloved ones.”<sup>11</sup>

George MacLeod said: “We do not seek Christ in the ruins, we find him in the fellowship...the Church is a movement, not a meeting house.”<sup>12</sup> The Iona Community became “a laboratory school of Christian living”<sup>13</sup> and so it has been ever since.

When you stay at Iona these days, there is a radical egalitarianism among your group: rich and poor have no distinction, physical ability does not separate, staff do not operate apart from volunteers and volunteers are intermingled with guests. Everyone, everyone works together, every day to maintain the community. In work and in worship, God is there.

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<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, p. 55

<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, p. 55

<sup>10</sup> Ferguson, pages 61-62

<sup>11</sup> John Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality*, p. 93

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson, p. 65

<sup>13</sup> Ferguson, p. 66

The Iona Community is global now. And its mission is so clear:

“We are motivated by our shared commitment to Jesus Christ’s proclamation of a just new order; by our own experience of the common life; and by a creative spiritual practice of prayer, song, silence and sacrament.”<sup>14</sup> The Community is committed to specific ways of worship, and specific justice principles.

On this holy island, a thin place connecting heaven and earth - and among all of the scattered members of the Iona Community around the world, God has breathed new, and ongoing life.

Now, it’s not all perfect, it’s not all figured out.

In the summer of 2025, walking the island, I found myself in front of the MacLeod Centre for youth, built only a few decades ago. But last summer this building looked like dry bones. Five minutes walk from a flourishing Community, the building seemed abandoned, weeds breaking through asphalt, a strange statue of the Fallen Christ at its doors, an alarm beeping continuously from deep within.

Once again, the Community is discerning how to make dry bones live. Will this building be transformed as a eco-friendly conference centre, or renewed for youth work, or given to serve as affordable housing - yes, even the island of Iona needs affordable housing? The Community is praying for this season’s prophecy prophetic word.

God’s word of new life and new hope, God’s spirit blowing life into dry bones, is not a one and done experience. We can see this at Iona: where half a dozen times something new has been built, half a dozen

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<sup>14</sup> <https://iona.org.uk/about/our-vision-and-values/>

times new life has been embraced, half a dozen times new ways have been found to serve the world.

And the story of 1500 years of a place, a community that has changed and transformed, survived challenges and embraced new life and brought goodness and justice to people around the world over and over again

is a gift  
to any of us  
who have ever wondered  
if we  
are standing in a valley of dry bones.

Maybe we are standing in a valley of dry bones.

But the story isn't over.

We cry out: O Lord, you know.

And God responds: I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.

We wait for the LORD, our souls wait,  
and in God's word we hope.

Amen.



(MacLeod Centre photo by Reebee, summer 2025)



(The Fallen Christ by Ronald Rae. The statue is intentionally on its side.)