

**Hard Times: Hope From The Prophets
COME TOGETHER**

Ezekiel 37:1-14

*The Spirit of God can bring us restoration, revival, and
reconciliation.*

A sermon preached by
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves
First United Methodist Church
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Every generation is defined by crisis. Sometimes a crisis will steer the fate of several generations. In a sense, our response to crisis is what forms our identity.

Think about American history, how the different crises we have faced as a nation have determined our character. Probably the most disruptive was the Civil War; some of the issues of that conflict are still being worked out. In the 20th century, it seemed like crisis followed crisis: World War I and the Spanish flu pandemic at the same time, the Great Depression in the 1930's followed closely by the Second World War, Vietnam and Watergate in the 1960's and 70's. We started out the 21st century with the 9/11 terrorist attack. Each crisis left an imprint on our national soul. I wonder what the historians will say about the Coronavirus pandemic and the economic collapse of 2020?

When you look at the history of the Jewish people, they were defined by several crisis times. First there was enslavement in Egypt, which was followed by 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. That formed their identity as the people of God. Shortly after the time of Christ, the Romans sacked Jerusalem and destroyed Herod's Temple. People still pray at the foundation of that structure, the holiest place in Judaism. In the 20th century, the Jews suffered the Nazi Holocaust. Six million Jews were murdered, and the nation, if not the world, would never be the same.

The crisis that formed the background of Jewish identity in the prophetic period was the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon by the Babylonians and the 70-year exile of the Jewish people to Babylon. All the prophets stand in relation to this catastrophic event, and it gave us some of the most powerful Scripture in the Bible.

Today our prophet *du jour* is Ezekiel, the third of the major prophets. Ezekiel was a priest in the Temple during the fall of Judah and Jerusalem. He was carried away into exile in the first deportation in 597 BCE, but he knew of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple just ten years later. He prophesied over a period of about twenty years, and he died in Babylon, without seeing the restoration he prophesied.

You can see the progression of events through the eyes of Ezekiel in his collected writings that we know as the Book of Ezekiel. The first 24

chapters of the book are oracles of judgment, directed at the remnant of Jews who remained in Jerusalem before it fell. Then starting in chapter 33, after Jerusalem was destroyed, the prophecy of Ezekiel takes on a much more hopeful tone, anticipating the day when the Jews would return home and God's enemies would be defeated. Then the last eight chapters of the book are a detailed vision of the new Temple that would be built in Jerusalem when they came home again. It was a Temple Ezekiel never saw.

Our Scripture text today is the third of four ecstatic vision that Ezekiel had, all of which begin, "*The hand of the Lord was upon me.*"¹ When God put his hand on Ezekiel, the prophet saw some strange sights! The Spirit of the Lord carried Ezekiel somewhere to a valley full of dry bones. Maybe there had been a battle, and bones were all that was left of the soldiers. The Lord asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel played it safe: "O Lord, you know." In other words, "I'm not God here. This is your show." So the Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to preach them back into existence. Then began a two-stage resurrection. First the bones rattled back together. Muscles and organs grew on the bones, and skin grew on the muscles, until there was a valley full of dead bodies.

Then comes a passage that you have to know a little Hebrew to understand. In Hebrew, the word for wind and breath and spirit is all the same word—*ruach*. So this is all a play on that word: "*Prophecy to the wind/breath/spirit, prophecy, mortal, and say to the wind/breath/spirit: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O wind/breath/spirit, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.*"² So Ezekiel calls the breath of God into these dead bodies, and like the creation in Genesis, when God poured his breath into Adam, the bodies took on life. They breathed; they stood up, a great living multitude.

This must have been an incredible sight. Almost like a scene from a horror movie—a zombie apocalypse! I'm sure Ezekiel was wondering, "What does this mean?" Maybe you're wondering that, too. Fortunately, the Lord explains, "*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.'*"³ This is the people in exile. They are like dry bones in the

desert, scattered and lifeless. Carried away to a foreign land, they have lost all hope. Being “cut off completely” was a euphemism for death. They were like dead in Babylon.

So now God gives Ezekiel a message for God’s people. God is going to do three things for them. God is going to bring them up out of their graves. Dead no more! New life for everyone! Then God is going to bring them back to the land of Judah. They will see home again. Their feet will touch the sacred soil of Jerusalem once more. And finally, God says they will have God’s spirit within them, and they will live. This sort of sounds like Jeremiah’s idea of the new covenant, written on the heart.

That was a powerful message to a people in exile 2600 years ago. But what does that mean for us today? How does that impact our faith when we are dealing with a pandemic, an economic collapse, and systemic injustice in our society? Listen up.

The Spirit of God can bring restoration. We know what it’s like to feel like dry bones scattered on the desert floor, don’t we? We know what it’s like to be broken and bitter and battered by life. We have been cut off from God by our sin and our stubbornness more times than we can probably count.

To a people broken not only by sin but by intense and complete political disruption, Ezekiel gave a word of healing and hope. God will bring you up from your graves. God will bring you back to your home. God’s Spirit is in you. You can be restored.

E. Stanley Jones found himself far from home and needing restoration at a critical point in his life. Called to minister and evangelize in India, this pale American found the Indian climate unbearable. After only a short time in India, Jones returned to the U. S. for healing and rest. After a year, he returned to India, only to suffer another complete physical breakdown. Finally, in despair, Jones had a turning-point experience. In prayer in the city of Lucknow, Jones heard a voice. Jones was no Old Testament prophet; he was a Methodist and a seminary professor. But the voice spoke to him nevertheless: “Do you want to do this work to which I have called you in India?”

Jones answered the voice, “Oh, yes, Lord. You know how much I want to do this work.”

The voice said, “Do you believe you can do it?”

Jones replied, “No, Lord, I’m done for. I’ve reached the end of my resources, and I can’t go on.”

The voice responded immediately, “If you’ll turn that problem over to me and not worry about it, I’ll take care of it.”

Jones said, “Lord, I close the bargain right here!”

That night, E. Stanley Jones turned it over to the Lord, and for the next 40 years he maintained a backbreaking schedule that would have destroyed many people. Never once in those 40 years did he have another breakdown. He was completely restored to health, energy, and vitality.⁴

If you are living with a need for physical healing today, if important relationships in your life are broken, if peace in your heart and soul is shattered, hear this word of hope: God’s Spirit can bring you restoration.

The Spirit of God can also bring you revival. Sometimes it’s our faith that needs restoration. The hardships of life can draw us away from our walk with God. It seems like it’s hard to feel as close to God as we once were. Do you ever feel like that? I worry about people in this time of quarantine and lockdown, not having church and small groups to attend in person. It’s harder to maintain that fellowship with the divine without a human community. I worry that folks are drifting away from their faith.

In Scripture, whenever the wind of God blows, there is a revival of the spirit. People turn to God, and their faith is renewed. In the third chapter of John, Jesus has an after-hours meeting with a prominent Pharisee named Nicodemus. Jesus explained that if Nicodemus wanted to know God, he must be born from above. Nicodemus misunderstands, thinking about physical rebirth. Jesus tries to explain that he is talking about the rebirth of the spirit. Like Hebrew, Greek uses the same word for wind, breath, and spirit. He says, “*Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*”⁵ It’s like the wind. When God sent a powerful manifestation of the Holy Spirit into the disciples after the

ascension of Jesus, how did the Spirit come? As a mighty wind on the Day of Pentecost! That day, the church was born from above.

Maybe what you're needing today is a birth of the spirit. I understand that five months of pandemic and economic disaster and political unrest can wear you down and wear you out. Our usual coping mechanisms—worshipping together, Sunday School, small groups, fellowship—have not been available. I know you can be with God through prayer and personal study, but I also know that few of us have that kind of discipline. Maybe you need to ask God to come into your heart today, to come in for the first time, or to come back in, and bring a new fire to your spiritual life. Ask the wind of God to blow, and be born anew. There is hope, because God's Spirit can bring revival.

Finally, God's Spirit can bring reconciliation. This is a word of hope from Ezekiel that I think is especially powerful today. Our world is so divided. The divisions are political, economic, racial, national, and religious. Unity, compassion, togetherness, grace, and civility seem like unachievable goals. We started out the pandemic seeing everywhere, "We're all in this together," but even that seems to have broken down lately.

This is not the way God made us. God made us for unity. Jesus prayed that all his disciples would be one.⁶ Paul said we are all part of one body in Christ, each part performing an important function.⁷ In another place, Paul said we are all "ambassadors of reconciliation."⁸ In the words of Dr. King, we were meant to live in a "beloved community."⁹

We need to come together today. We need to come together like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision. We need to come together across the lines of politics and racial and economic injustice and religious differences and sexual identities. We need to love one another and be reconciled. Reconciliation is more than just words or ideas or aspirations. It's action born of love and understanding that can bring people together and make a difference in our world.

In June of this year, while protests over the killing of George Floyd by a police officer in Minneapolis were going on all over the country, there was a car crash involving a police officer in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. Daylan

McLee heard the crash and ran out of his apartment to see flames engulfing the police car. He pulled the officer out of the car and saved his life.

This is interesting because Daylan is a Black man who has suffered injustice at the hands of the police. In 2016, he was arrested at a bar while trying to disarm a gunman. The police thought he was pointing the gun at them, and despite security camera footage that showed otherwise, Daylan was convicted and spent a year in jail, away from his family and away from his mother, who had a terminal illness. When the conviction was reversed, McLee filed a lawsuit seeking justice against four state troopers for wrongful arrest.

Yet the night of the police car crash, he didn't hesitate to save the officer's life. He told a reporter, "There is value in every human life. We are all children of God, and I can't imagine just watching anyone burn. No matter what other people have done to me, I thought, 'this guy deserves to make it home safely to his family.'" McLee stressed forgiveness, saying he couldn't blame every police officer for bad interactions he had with a few: "We need to work on our humanity ... that's the main problem of this world. We're stuck on how to get up or to get even, and that is not how I was raised to be. You learn, you live, you move on, and I was always taught to forgive big. You can't base every day of your life off of one interaction you have with one individual. I don't want to be called a hero. I just want to be known as an individual who is an upstanding man. And I hope [those troopers] see this and know [they're] forgiven."¹⁰

The Spirit of God can bring restoration, revival, and reconciliation. How does your life need to come together today? Do you need to find healing for your brokenness? Do you need to renew your commitment to a life of faith? Do you need to reconcile with someone who has hurt you? We live in a dry and dusty time, like bones scattered across the desert floor. God has a word of hope for you today, and the wind is beginning to blow!

¹ Ezekiel 37:1.

² Ezekiel 37:9.

³ Ezekiel 37:11.

⁴ <https://goodnewsmag.org/2019/05/brother-e-stanley-jones/>.

⁵ John 3:7-8.

⁶ John 17:21.

⁷ I Corinthians 12:27.

⁸ II Corinthians 5:18-20.

⁹ <https://thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy/>.

¹⁰ Claudia Lauer, “Man wronged in past by police saves officer from burning car,” Associated Press (6-22-20).