

What Hope?

Cycle # 2 – Session #5

What Hope?

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Gathering

Opening Worship

Light a candle as a reminder of God's presence

Song: *Here I Am, Lord -- #452 Chalice Hymnal*

Litany

I will take you from the nations,
and gather you from all the countries,
and bring you into your own land.

**I will sprinkle clean water upon you,
and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses,
and from all your idols I will cleanse you.**

A new heart I will give you,
and a new spirit I will put within you;
**and I will remove from your body the heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh.**

I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

Welcome One Another. Spend a few minutes sharing with one another one way you have seen God blessing you or your congregation.

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Scripture

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 round 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, 'Prophesy 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, '*Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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 prophesy, 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.'

Dwelling in Scripture

1st reading - Allow people time to reflect on what they have heard.
Note the word or phrase which drew your attention this time.

2nd reading - Invite people to talk about what they have heard and
where it might intersect with their lives.

Phrases which stand out:

The hand of the lord...brought me out by the spirit, valley full of bones, asked, "Mortal, can these bones live? You shall live and you shall know that I am the LORD" So I prophesied as I had been commanded...but there was no breath in them. Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal and say to the breath... Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost, we are cut off completely.'

Behind the Text

The book of Ezekiel is filled with some of the most fantastic visions in either the first or second Testament and yet we know more about the prophet, the time of the writing, the dates of the events which are the undergirding of his writings than almost any other person in the scriptures. The opening verse of Ezekiel reads, "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month, on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river of Chebar, the heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God." Those words draw us into the life and times of Ezekiel, the son of Buzi. At the time of his call, he and 10,000 of the best and brightest of his fellow citizens were in exile in Babylon. He had been carried off with King Johoiachin, all of the king's household, plus 7,000 artisans and smiths, as well as those best able to fight. (II Kings 24:14-15) While the writer of Kings says only the weakest were left behind, that's probably an exaggeration. More than likely it was people out in the countryside and people who were seen as of no consequence, as well as the elderly and poor.

Ezekiel like many others whom God presses into service, had not set out to become a prophet. We know he was a priest and apparently loved his work in the temple. Much of his imagery seems to reflect some of the ritual and wonder of worship, even when it is dressed in the language of vision. And then, sometime in 593 BCE (best guess) God called him to take on the task of being a prophet. Like others before and after him, once he accepted the call he was a faithful voice for God until he had spoken what he was called to speak (598-586 BCE.). The task given to him was to challenge and dismantle the common theology of his day an extremely difficult task for any time and any place.

Often the names of people in the scriptures have important meanings. Ezekiel's may be defined as *God Strengthens* or *May God Strengthen* (NIB, Vo IVII., p. 1086). Who else beside a person of great strength and fortitude could carry out the work to which he had been called? His work was not only to challenge, but dismantle these common beliefs:

- 1) *They were God's people and had been because of the covenant relationship that dated to the time of Abraham and his descendents.*

- 2) *Because of that covenant and God's promise that the Davidic dynasty would last in perpetuity, God would protect them no matter what they did.*
- 3) *The Temple which was the center of their worship and God's dwelling place would never be destroyed.*
- 4) *Solomon's temple was the only suitable place for worshipping Yahweh.*

NIB Vol I, p1082-3)

Against that background Ezekiel came to tell them that God was determined to punish them for their misdeeds and unfaithfulness to the point of allowing them to be taken into captivity, their land devastated by famine, destroyed by war, even permitting the temple to be burned and sacked. Along with that he taught that Nebuchadrezzar II might think he was succeeding out of his own power, but he was in reality only a tool of the one powerful and angry God. What Nebuchadrezzar was doing was completely controlled as was the future of God's people. It would only be by their complete penitence and submission to God, that God would restore them to their homeland. If you read the first 32 chapters of Ezekiel you will see his picture of God's anger, violence, and vengefulness. At chapter 33 there is a change and from there to the end of the book he offers a vision of hope for restoration and transformation.

The history of Israel and Judah is full of accounts of countries tromping through them so that at times they were controlled by one powerful nation or another; Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, with some brief respites. Judah had on the whole fared a little better than Israel, but after centuries of weak rulers, and brief respites from outside control, they had fallen and their last king was taken away. In part their history was shaped by their location in what is called the "Fertile Crescent." When any of the larger more powerful nations chose to go to war with each other, the easiest, most direct route was through Judah and Israel.

(If you would like to read more about how they came to find themselves in Babylon at the time of Ezekiel, there is an excellent article in the New Interpreter's Bible, Vol IV, pp.1076-1100.)

In the book of Ezekiel there are four visions.

- 1) 1:1-3:15 describes his commissioning as a prophet.
- 2) 8:1-11:24, he is transported by the spirit to the temple where he sees the devastation of the temple and the glory of God abandoning Jerusalem.
3. 37:1-11:24 in which he is transported to the valley of the dry bones.
4. 40-48, in which the hand of Yahweh transports him to a very high mountain where he witnesses the new temple and the return of God's glory.

If you have time and interest, reading Ezekiel *cover to cover* is a fascinating experience which allows you to see the scope of the story in which each of the visions point to a segment of the unfolding events. While chapters 37:1-14 are the immediate focus of this study, it is actually part of a longer vision and you may want to read the whole of the vision as a way of fitting the passage we will be studying in a slightly larger context.

Observation

There are several words and phrases which appear repeatedly and help establish the setting. God repeatedly addresses Ezekiel as *Mortal*. And as mortal he is given various tasks to do and messages to proclaim. While one of the common ways of announcing a vision is, “*The word of the Lord came to me*, Ezekiel begins the vision with the words, “*The hand of the Lord came upon me.*” In this case he is transported to a “valley” where he sees the dry, fleshless bones, perhaps as on the site of an actual battlefield, where the fallen had been left unburied but had been left to the elements to be carrion for the scavengers. He stresses just how dry the remains are. Then God asks, “O Mortal, can these bones live?” Since we know only the words of Ezekiel’s answer and can’t know how he said them, “*O, Lord, you know,*” we really can’t know whether they were said with conviction or doubt, with a shrug or even a snicker.

Consider

Place yourself in this scene. If you’ve ever visited a battlefield long after the battle, there may not be bodies strewn around, but picture if you can a large open field, as at Gettysburg, covered with bones and imagine walking around the perimeter. If you were to respond to God’s question, “O Mortal, can these bones live?” How might you respond? The question may be how dead is dead? But is there anything more dead than skeletal remains after every shred of flesh has fallen away?

Observation

No matter how Ezekiel may have answered, he doesn’t actually say the bones can’t live. All the way through this book two things seem obvious. 1) Events which are unfolding in the world are doing so because of the actions of Yahweh. 2) Even the most horrendous of the events Ezekiel has described up to this point are seen not as a result of any weakness which God might have, but are happening because of Yahweh’s great power. 3) He never says there is anything which Yahweh cannot do. It is important to remember that what he is seeing is a vision, not a reality, so the laws concerning dead bodies don’t enter into his consideration. He is only seeing the dry bones in imagination and even when he touches them in imagination, he is not defiled and made unclean for 7 days as he would be if they were real. This may add to the sense of the analytical or dispassionate consideration of those bones.

Consider

How close or distant are you from Ezekiel’s understanding of God? Do you see God as somehow permitting, if not using, events in our world? How powerful do you understand God to be?

Observation

God’s prophets are usually understood to be somewhat strange either because of the behaviors they carry out at God’s commands or words which they say. Ezekiel, is no

less strange than any of the others, so it's probably a good thing he is able to describe these events in the context of a vision. His conversations with God seem in some ways to be made of ordinary stuff. As he is still looking at the bones, he is told to prophesy to them as if they could hear what he is saying. He begins by commanding their attention, "*O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.*" Their restoration will follow a 4 step process, first the bones will have to come together, and then sinews will cover the bones, next the flesh and skin. The final step will be the restoration of breath which God will breathe into them. Until the breath is restored, they will not be alive, now matter how fully the bodies are restored. This process is the reversal of the process by which bodies decompose. The revived people will know and acknowledge who God is.

The two words, breath and spirit are very closely related. It is not only the air they breathe which is important, it is the animation which comes from being *inspired*. In Hawaii, Caucasians are referred to as Haolis or the people of "no breath". That reference comes from many things undoubtedly, but one of them may have been they saw the Caucasians who came as lacking in spirit, people who didn't breathe deeply or live passionately. Not only that, they were very colorless, both in their bodies and their dress. While those who come have changed in many ways, the name stuck.

Consider

Where do you see people of spirit? Who are the people you know who are most alive? Are you a person of passion and spirit? About what are you passionate?

Observation

As Ezekiel describes the events, there is a step before the enfleshing of the bones. First the bones begin to move and to find each other so that the skeletons are reformed. All the bones that have been separate and scattered move toward wholeness. Only after they are reassembled can the rest of the process take place. Even after they are together and covered with all the elements of a living body, there is still one thing missing. They are not breathing. Again, Ezekiel is told to prophesy, calling on the four winds which appear to be the source of the breath or spirit which fills the bodies and restores them to life. Ezekiel wasn't pointing out that spirit and body are separate as has been stressed in Greek culture and their descendents, but rather he is pointing toward the essential nature of humans. It is in both the body and the presence of breath or spirit that we are truly alive, a unity.

Consider

Sit quietly for a few moments and reflect on the air you breathe, on the life it gives to you, remembering that God is as close to you as the air you breathe.

Observation

We now come to the heart of this passage. Again God addresses Ezekiel as *Mortal* and then says, these bones you've been looking at are really the bones of the whole house of Israel, meaning both the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom

of Israel. God doesn't dispute the reality of their despair. A common lament of the time, *"Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are cut off completely,"* may have its origin in an ancient proverb, *"A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones."* (Proverbs 17:12). The exiles in Babylon are cut off as were the people of Israel two centuries earlier. All that they had believed, all that they had hoped for seems lost. Their faith is dried up. The God they had expected to protect them has allowed them to not only be carried into captivity, but has allowed the temple to be destroyed.

Up to this point the entire process has been internal and a private conversation between Ezekiel and Yahweh. Now he is sent to make a public proclamation. Now he is to tell them four things.

- 1) This grave of exile is going to be opened and God will call them forth.
- 2) God will bring them back to their homeland.
- 3) By these actions they will know and recognize God as the source of not only their lives, but their salvation.
- 4) God will fill them with spirit and they will once again live on their own soil and know that this has happened because God has spoken and acted.

Consider

Probably the most important point in the vision is the restoration of breath which enlivens the body. None of it happens without God. So while there is work for us to do in preparing for the enlivening by the spirit, transformation doesn't happen until the spirit of God is present in a living, breathing, person. Look at your own life and the life of your congregation. How alive are you? Are there dry bones? Places and parts of your life which seem without life? Are there parts of the life of your church that seem to be without spirit or life? If so, how might you begin again to listen for God's invitation to new life? Are there things of which you would need to turn loose? Are there old things that can be let go of or filled with new meaning?

Activity (Optional)

Choose one area in your own life or in your church where there are some "dry bones" that need new life. What might help you restore the bones in preparation for the restoring breath of God - individually or around your church? What steps might you take? If you do this as a group activity what one project might you choose? This may be something as heady as the Bible study you're doing and perhaps designing something to strengthen your own faith or an activity to do with the children of your church. Or it may be tackling long neglected areas of your church building or your house and bringing those back to life and use. Whatever you choose, make it something about which you have some energy and which you can in fact do. Choose something doable and do not spend time on what you might do... if you had more time, or more money, or more help.

Practicing the Presence

- 1) Sometime each day this week, take time to become aware of your breath - is it shallow, can you breathe more deeply or slowly? What happens when you do? Are there situations in which you find yourself angry or anxious? If so, become conscious of your breathing and deliberately slow it down.
- 2) The scripture focus for the next session is Jonah 3-4

Suggested Reading Pattern

- 1st Read and listen to the text. Notice phrases that seem familiar or stand out for you. You may want to read it out loud or you may want to read it with someone else.
- 2nd Choose a word or phrase to carry with you and reflect on it as it comes to your mind through the day. (If you read at night – let the word or phrase rest overnight and pick it up in the morning. Remember the pattern of creation – “evening and morning.” You may receive fresh insights when you waken.)
- 3rd During the week read “Behind the Text” and the “Observations/Consider” on the text. Even a few minutes spent each day or several times a week, will enrich your experience of the study and the experience of your small group.

Closing Worship

Words to carry with you - The legend of the phoenix says that once every hundred years the bird bursts into flame, but that out of its ashes comes a new bird in all its wonder and splendor. God's church sometimes seems more dead than alive, bones so dry there is no life and yet over and over the church is given new life. Look for the newness. God's spirit restores and gives new life.

Prayer

As you have done in each session, notice the person on your right and on your left. Hold them in prayer during this week. Name one person or thing for which you are thankful?

Unison response (Unison)

**Eternal and loving God,
In the places of fear and emptiness, uphold us in your strength.
In the empty, dead places enliven us with your spirit.
In the places of confusion and hopelessness guide us with your wisdom.**

**In the darkest places give us your light.
May our eyes be open to see you all around us.
Our ears be open to your wisdom and your teachings,
Our hearts be open to your compassion that we may become
more wise, caring, compassionate people.**

Blessing (Unison)

**Holy Spirit, release us that we may be strong and free.
Sending spirit, empower us to reach out to others.
Fill us with your spirit and guide us on your way.**

Song: Lo, I Am With You -- #430 Chalice Hymnal