



May 15, 2005

Ezekiel 37:1-6
Getting Back to Life
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You are good at what you do. You're responsible, hard working, and loyal to your commitments. And it has all earned you a good life. To look at you, no one would ever know you had a problem in the world. In fact, when you look around you at those who have so many problems, you tell yourself you can't complain about a thing. But there is sadness buried deep within all of us.

For some it is buried so deeply we don't even know how to find it. But in an unguarded moment when you are not busy, perhaps while the choir is singing in worship or maybe late at night as you sit at a stoplight, the familiar old sadness returns.

The Bible claims that the source of this sadness is not because something happened to you long ago. It has little to do with your parents, your children, or the losses of old dreams, and everything to do with your soul longing to see God's presence in your life.

Six hundred years before Christ was born, the holy city of Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. After destroying the city, the Babylonians carried into captivity all the citizens of Jerusalem that we would now call middle class. There they joined other promising young Jews, like Daniel and Ezekiel, whom the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, had taken from Jerusalem ten years earlier.

These Jewish exiles in Babylon were not kept in prisons or even camps. They actually enjoyed considerable freedom there. They could marry, build homes, plant crops, and exchange in commerce. Since most of these exiles were hard working and industrious, some of them even became quite wealthy in Babylon. In exile, they were also free to assemble, elect leaders, and worship.

In spite of this freedom and prosperity, however, the Jews had a hard time worshiping in Babylon. That was because they never got over the destruction of their holy city and temple in Zion. It created a great theological crisis for them. They were not where they wanted to be in life, or where they were supposed to be. So they lived with a deep sadness that ran down to their bones. This is described in Psalm 137 which was written during this exile. "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our lyres.... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

I am always amazed by this, but often when people's lives have been interrupted by a great tragedy, the first thing they do is stop coming to worship. I used to think this was because they were embarrassed by their loss of a loved one, or a job, or health. But I have discovered that more often the reason people stop worshiping is that they feel they have lost their God. To stand in

worship beside so many who are singing praise to the Lord is just too much. This is one of the tragic ironies of our soul — in the times that we most need to worship, we find it most difficult.

So like the Jewish exiles in Babylon, we try to numb the spiritual pain in our lives by making life more comfortable in exile. We work hard. We collect a lot of things. We buy homes, plant our roots, argue local politics, and try to make Babylon as nice as we can, only to discover that it doesn't get rid of the deep sadness. You may even have to live with grief, or sickness, or a broken heart for a long time. But that isn't what makes you sad either. The sadness settled into your bones on the day you gave up trying to find God in Babylon.

Eventually things got so cozy for the exiles, that even after they were encouraged to return Jerusalem most of them didn't want to go back. The old dream of living in the Lord's presence had died, buried under piles and piles of coping devices.

So one day, the Spirit of the Lord grabbed hold of his prophet Ezekiel and the Spirit took him to a valley that was filled with dry bones. The Lord asked Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Thinking hard, Ezekiel said, "Ah, Lord, you know the answer to this one." Then the Lord said, "Start preaching to the bones. This is what you will say: '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.... And you shall know that I am the Lord.'"

Can you imagine how foolish this must have looked? Here is the Lord's prophet, standing in the middle of a pile of dead bones telling them that God is not done with them. "He's going to breathe on you, dry bones. He's going to cause breath to enter you, just as God put his breath into Adam at creation making him a living being. And you will live again. You will hope again. You will know again that he is God, and you are his people. You will never again settle for comfort, or power, or work when from your bones you long to know the comfort, power, and work of God Almighty."

If I were Ezekiel, I would have gently suggested that the Lord first bring these bones back to life and then I would do a little preaching. "See," I'd say, "See what God can do?" But the Lord calls us to believe without seeing — which is another word for hope. And it is the hope that brings us back to life. Hope rises up from our bones and chooses to believe in spite of how it is. Hope proclaims that the way things appear is precarious. So we dare not absolutize the present. Don't take it too seriously. Don't bank on today because it will not last. Thus, hope is revolutionary.

That is why the poor are actually great at hoping and why we in the middle and upper classes who are coping well in Babylon have such a hard time with hope. We think we are doing well enough. But if you are living without a real sense of God's presence in your life, your life is withering away to the dry bones.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela includes a description of his twenty-seven years of imprisonment. It was not where he wanted to be or where he was supposed to be. It was Babylon in the very worst sense of the term. Over half those years were spent under

the blistering sun in the lime quarries of Robben Island. The work was literally killing Mandela and his fellow prisoners. The guards were cruel. The conditions were horrible. That prison was designed to extinguish all hope, and it was clearly working — until Mandela and the prisoners began to sing songs.

They sang songs of the revolution in their native tongue that the guards did not speak. They sang folk songs, and spiritual songs, and songs that reminded them of home. And as they sang the Lord's song even in Babylon, their hope came back to life. And so did they.

After Mandela had spent 14 years on Robben Island, he was allowed to see his daughter for the first time since he was imprisoned. She brought with her his new granddaughter whom he had never seen. In their tradition, it falls to the grandfather to name the grandchildren. So when Mandela's daughter asked him what the name would be, he immediately said "Zaziwe" which means hope. He writes,

"The name has special meaning for me. The hope I found in prison never left me - and now it never would. I was convinced that this child would be part of a new generation of South Africans for whom Apartheid would be a distant memory - that was my dream."
(p.431)

When Mandela named that child "Hope," he was only halfway through his imprisonment. He had a long way to go. Some would say that he had no reason to hope. He and his people were just a pile of dry bones. But hope, remember, is revolutionary. Hope looks not at how it is, but at God's dreams for how it will be.

Why does our church keep going to the inner city neighborhoods, or to distant places like Malawi, pouring out our little cup of water into those vast places where hope has run dry? Why do we keep visiting the shut-ins, and those in hospitals when we have no miracle drug to take away their pain? Why do we keep gathering in Sunday school classes and Bible studies and worship when it's tempting to treat our despair with recreation or more work? Why? Because we will take our stand right beside Ezekiel, proclaiming our hope to the great valley of dry bones. "Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live!"

You who gave up hope and dreaming a long time ago, hear the Word of the Lord. You who have settled for comfortable routines, you who think your best years are behind you, and you who believe the Lord God has forgotten all about your little life, arise from the heap of discarded dreams! Arise to discover the Holy Spirit is breathing life back into you. Arise to live with magnificent hope. Because God is not done. Amen.