

## **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, 'Prophecy 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, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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 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. 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.'

**A Season of Dryness** - March 29, 2020

*Ezekiel 37:1-14*

If ever there was a time to feel used up, dried out, and confused, it is now. Everyone of us has been affected by this Covid-19 pandemic. Many of us are largely confined to our homes. Some of us are able to work from there, many more find themselves unemployed through no fault of their own. I think our hearts go out especially to all those who must venture from their homes into situations where they know they are potentially exposing themselves to the virus — and possibly bringing it home to their families.

I'm not just talking about the dedicated doctors and nurses working with infected patients and all the other people suffering from the — what can I say? — regular illnesses that do not go away in the middle of a pandemic. I was in to see my cardiologist last week, a man who has been practicing for over 40 years. He told me, “My friends all say, why don't you stay home and avoid the risk of getting this thing? I said, no, this is what I signed up for 40 years ago and I promised to do it in good times and bad. That's why I'm here for you.”

I saw a young woman on TV recently. She is in her final year at New York University Medical School. At NYU, they've asked all the students about to graduate if they would be willing to graduate right now so they could join in. She said she would. At age 27, this woman is taking the risk, even before her career has begun, to insert herself in the insanity of overcrowded, dangerous patient care. She knows full well that she can contract the virus herself.

But I want to point out some of the unmentioned heroes in the workplace. The hospitals have cleaners, people delivering supplies, and all kinds of support staff who are also vulnerable. Have you considered the stock people, clerks, cashiers, and other people in our grocery stores and other stores. They aren't wearing masks. They can't social distance. They have dozens and dozens of

people literally breathing, perhaps coughing and sneezing on them. Can we say a prayer for these people risking their health for us?

Let us pray: Loving God, you are with us at all times, in the good times and the bad. We are in bad times right now, not only as a nation, but as individuals. Help us, we pray, make sense of this situation. Help us keep faith when things seem so uncertain. We thank you, O Lord, for the many people who are helping in so many ways to keep things operating, risking their health and even their lives. Bless them at work and at home. Grant us patience, give us the ability to see your love and grace at work. We pray for the peace that passes all understanding to bring us through this. We trust in you each and every day. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Yet here we find ourselves, in this terrible season of dryness. Prayer helps. I hope you are taking advantage of the resources we are offering on our website. We have a 10-minute daily prayer video on our website which can be viewed at anytime — anytime you need a time out, go online and use it. On Tuesday evenings at 6:30, we gather for a service conducted in the Taizé style of worship. It is filled with silence, simple music, and contemplation. This service is also recorded so you can view it at anytime. Starting this week, the Sunday service is being recorded and will be posted online as well. It is indeed a time of dryness, but we are trying to not leave you without spiritual resources.

Now in our scripture today, we meet a man who was definitely without spiritual resources. The prophet Ezekiel did his ministry during a time when the children of Israel had dwindled to a handful. Recall that just as prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, and Hosea had preached — over and over again — God allowed the nation of Babylon to invade and destroy Israel. In the year 597, the Babylonians captured the leaders of Israel and dragged them into exile in Babylon. Ten years later, the Israelites who remained mounted a rebellion

against Babylon. This time, the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple built by Solomon.

Most of us in this country cannot imagine such a situation. Perhaps some of us have experienced a major earthquake, flood, fire, or hurricane — situations where we wake up to see everything around us flattened. We've all seen pictures of cities bombed to smithereens, washed away by tsunamis, and baked by drought. That was Israel during the time of Ezekiel. Dryness, desolation, and despair.

So is it any wonder that God sent Ezekiel a vision with which he could resonate. Ezekiel had a dream in which he saw a valley of dry bones. The dry bones represented the dry, empty, dispirited nation of Israel which had been ripped apart and had no hope or expectation of ever coming back together. Indeed, in the thought processes of the day, most Israelites assumed the gods of the Babylonians had “defeated” their God and therefore they had no reason and no one to worship. The dry bones not only represented the people who had lost their lives in all the upheaval, but those who had lost their faith in a God who seemingly had abandoned them just when they needed God the most.

There is no question that many of us feel that way right now, not just because of the Pandemic but for a long time before it arrived. A few days ago, our president stated his hope that America could get back to work in time for Easter because he loved the sight of packed churches. Let me say that I fervently wish — as to all of you — that such could be the case. It would be so wonderful if the pandemic were over and we all could get back to life and pack the churches on Easter.

We know that will not be the case. The schools in New Jersey won't reopen until at least April 20, probably later. But more importantly, what our president said about packed churches is a little misinformed, I'm afraid.

We are, as the church, living in circumstances not unlike those of Ezekiel. While there may be packed churches somewhere, I have yet to see one. I can't recall being in a church, any church, which was packed for a Sunday worship service. I have seen packed churches for some funerals, but not regular worship.

I know there are members of this congregation who do recall when our sanctuary was packed — but that was a long time ago.

Yes, we are living in a season of dryness. There are many today, just like the Israelites 2500 years ago, who wonder whether God is relevant, or even here. So many have given up faith altogether. Others cling to the notion of a "higher power" but have little idea as to what that higher power is about or how that higher power expects us to live. It is a season of dryness.

But enough about the church. Dryness extends well beyond whatever is happening in church.

We are all experiencing a dry season in our lives. Those of us who are fortunate to be at work are having little of the usual office camaraderie and interactions that are normal for office life. Those of us confined to our homes are going stir crazy trying to figure out what to do after having binge-watched every show of every series we like — and even the ones we don't like.

Churches are mostly closed and while this Zoom gathering is intended to — and I hope does — promote a sense of community and fellowship, it is hardly a substitute for the real thing of gathering together to worship God. Now, one of the things we have learned is that there is a need for virtual worship,

regardless of the presence or absence of a pandemic. I think we will continue online worship and recording it even after we are able to be together again.

However, it is still a dry season. Most of us have a lot of time on our hands and the question is what are we doing with it? For some, these empty times are becoming very revealing. By that, I mean many of us are learning how much of our time we spend interacting with others, going out and around, and just plain keeping busy with things that may or may not be necessary.

We are having to slow down for a change and examine ourselves. Some of us may be asking questions about how we have been spending our time now that we have all the time in the world, but very little to do with it. Naturally, it leads to stir-craziness. It can lead, as we sadly know, to an increase in domestic violence and child abuse. It can lead to an increase in the use of drugs and alcohol. It undoubtedly will lead to more divorces and more babies in the months ahead.

But the fundamental question, friends, is where do we find ourselves in this season of dryness. Many of us have reached a point where we can and need to look inward at our lives and assess them. For once, we have the time. What will we find?

Some, I fear, will look inside and find nothing but a field of lifeless, dry bones. Some will realize that they have spent too much time and money pursuing a life of food, drink, and material possessions, rather than a life dedicated to discovering our many talents and abilities and putting them to work in the service of others.

Now the things I have been saying in the past few moments may strike some as being rather depressing. That's not my intent.

Ezekiel, in his dream, saw nothing but death and destruction all around him in the field of dry bones. He had cause to be depressed. His nation was gone. His city was in ruins. He had no idea who, if anybody, still followed the Lord. How could he have hope? How could he have faith? How could he keep living in the midst of disaster?

Indeed, how can we keep on living with any kind of hope in the midst of the disasters and uncertainties we are dealing with right now?

God gave Ezekiel the answer. He asked Ezekiel, "O Mortal, can these bones live?" I'm sure Ezekiel wanted to utter the answer most of us would give. Most of us would say to God, "Of course not! Dead is dead. Emptiness is emptiness. Dry bones are nothing but dry bones."

But God gave Ezekiel a different answer. God said, "Prophecy to the bones 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. And Ezekiel did so. And the bones came back to life. And yes, it was not long after that that the Israelites were able to return to Jerusalem. They came back to rebuild and restart the nation. Needless to say, the new Israel was not the same as the old one. There were many changes. But one thing did remain: the people remembered their God and worshipped their God and knew that even in the midst of the emptiness, dryness, and despair of life, God was there with them.

The Jewish people know this is true and still do. We know that they returned from Babylon and rebuilt they stayed 500 more years. But not long after Jesus' time on earth, the Romans destroyed Jerusalem again and sent the Jews into exile again. For nearly 2000 they were scattered all over the world, still faithful, still worshipping, still praying for the day they could return. And yes, in 1948, they could and many did.

In our own season of dryness, let us take a lesson from Ezekiel. God never promised we would have endless good times for following God. Indeed, for many the cost of faith has sometimes been a worse life materially and physically than leaving God alone. But God is always faithful to us. As we examine ourselves — as I pray all of us are doing — may we reach the conclusion that the God who watched Israel go into exile and then return from exile, not once but three times, is the God who is with us right here and right now, standing with us in our own dryness and exile. Believe, friends! Have faith, friends! God loves you. God knows your pain, doubt, and fear. And God will never, ever, let you go!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.