

March 26th, 2023

Ezekiel 37:1-14 “Can These Bones Live?”

Okay. As Barbara was reading our text this morning, I could sort of feel some of the vibes here in the room and even out there from our online friends. And as I closed my eyes, I could even imagine the words that came along with these vibes. And they said, “Since week two of Lenten season, Jesse has been in John’s gospel. And now all of a sudden he shifts gears and chooses the Old Testament text for the week. Drops John like a hot potato in favor of Ezekiel. That weirdo just wanted to have an excuse to preach about zombies.” And you know what? You’re not entirely wrong. See, I’m a big fan of the zombie genre whether it’s in literature or film. I loved the book *World War Z*. The movie not as much, but it’s still pretty good. Same applies to *I Am Legend*. The 1954 novel was great and is often credited as the beginning of the “worldwide apocalypse brought on by disease” genre. The Will Smith movie was good too, but his dog died and that will ruin a movie for me every time. George Romero’s 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* is considered the first zombie movie and has influenced many books, movies, television shows, comics, and video games. Some of my favorite movies are *Dawn of the Dead*, *28 Days Later*, *Shaun of the Dead*, and *Scooby-Doo on Zombie Island*. (Hey, we had three boys, and it was a clever story for a kids’ movie.) *Left 4 Dead* was a great video game that the boys and I used to play online with one of the funeral directors at Newton Bracewell. The *Walking Dead* was good for about four seasons. I even got Gwen hooked on that one for a while. Don’t get me started on *The Last of Us*. That’s just one of the best shows in the history of television period. I like the zombie genre because it’s never about the zombies. The zombies are just window dressing for the real message which is, “Human beings are often the scariest monsters on the planet.” These stories force us to examine and realign our moral compasses. We think we know how we would react to a global crisis, but are we really as decent and altruistic as we *think* we are? Or would we just turn on each other and let the world crumble around us rather than cooperate and work together to address the problems that threaten to annihilate us?

Well, we hope you're happy, pastor. You got to talk about zombies from the pulpit. Bravo. You interrupted a perfectly good series of sermons from John's gospel because you wanted to wave your geek flag and talk about zombies. Okay. Want to know what today's lesson from John's gospel is about? Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. So really, it wasn't about choosing whether I should talk about zombies or not. It was about whether we wanted to deal with a single zombie or a zombie horde. The introduction to this sermon would have been the same either way.

Now that we've got that out of the way, let's dig into this story from Ezekiel. Ezekiel is one of the four major prophets in the Bible alongside Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. Ezekiel was born into the priestly class of Israel which means that he was in line to serve as a temple priest, but he was taken captive by the Babylonians with the first wave of exiles in 597 BC about a decade before Jerusalem was destroyed. While he was working in the Babylonian village of Tel-Abib, he was called by God to be a prophet. His prophesies were directed toward the people of Israel both before and after the fall of Jerusalem. He's known for being one of the stranger prophets in the Old Testament because of his bizarre visions and bizarre behavior. One of his prophetic visions inspired the song, "Ezekiel saw the wheel, way up in the middle of the air." And no, don't worry, I'm not going to say anything about how UFO enthusiasts use that passage to prove their point. We've got enough strange things to deal with in the prophetic vision we have on the table in front of us this morning. Which, by the way, also inspired a song called "Dem Bones."

In this vision, the spirit of God leads Ezekiel to the middle of a valley scattered with old dry bones. It's important to note that these bones are not the bones of the newly dead, but rather the bones of ones who have been long dead. Maybe it was a battlefield although there's nothing in the text that indicates this. Biblical literalists want to use this story as proof of bodily resurrection. If God can re-animate ancient dry bones, then surely God can resurrect Jesus after three days, and if God can resurrect Jesus, then God can resurrect us. But as I indicated before, this

passage is a *vision*. There's nothing in this text that implies that this was a historical event. This is a vision that invites listeners to have hope.

Unfortunately, there are seasons in our lives where hope feels pretty ridiculous. More ridiculous than zombies even. I don't know what it was about the Wednesday's NBC Nightly News broadcast, but it seemed particularly absurd to me. It started out with a story about yet another school shooting where two school administrators at a high school in Denver were shot when they were searching a student for a weapon. This led to a story about tornadoes in Los Angeles and the number of deaths caused by the onslaught of storms that have hit California this season. That led to a story about a former president and possible candidate in the next presidential election being investigated for two felony crimes ... a historical landmark because this has never happened to a president in our country's 247-year history. Then there was the ongoing story of our shaky economy with another report about how banks are collapsing and interest rates are being raised again. Then there was a special interest story about the potential dangers of artificial intelligence which, by the way, has been a major theme in science fiction literature since the 1950s. Honestly, we need to start paying more attention to what the sci-fi writers are trying to tell us. Nightly News usually ends their broadcast with a "feel-good" story to give viewers a little hope after hearing so much disturbing news. And I appreciate their efforts ... really, I do. But you know what their Wednesday feel-good story was about? A group of people who were rescued at sea after a whale capsized their boat! Even the whales have had it with us!

When Ezekiel received this vision about the valley of dry bones, Israel was feeling helpless and hopeless. They had been taken captive by one of their many enemies. Why? Because since the earliest days of their monarchy, they became increasingly divided ... to the point where the kingdom was split right down the middle. The united Kingdom that rose to its glory under the rule of King David lost sight of their values and started putting their priorities on other things which caused a rift between God and God's people. The people started collapsing at every

level of public life – politically, socially, morally. Their enemies noticed this and used it as an opportunity to destroy Israel’s holy city and deport its ruling class to the Babylonian capital. To make things worse, some of these captives started saying, “Hey, these Babylonians are living the good life here ... we’ve been missing out.” But there were those who remained faithful to God and who knew that the reason they were in this situation was their own fault and that it could have been prevented. They had ignored the prophets who for generations had warned them about the very situation they were in. They felt defeated. Helpless. Hopeless. They were like a field of dry bones in the desert. The question on the captive Israelite’s minds was, “Are we going to make it?” Sometimes that’s the question on our minds too.

The good news for us is that God is not interested in that question. The question God had for Ezekiel, though, was quite important: “Can these bones live?” God doesn’t ask if it’s likely, or if the forecast looks promising. God doesn’t ask for pie charts and percentages. And, best of all, God doesn’t say, “Do you know how you’re going to get out of this?” Because God knows that Ezekiel feels just as overwhelmed by that question as we would. God asks: “Can these bones live?” This is not a question of *probability*, it’s a question of *possibility*.

What God wants to know is: “Can you see past the rubble, the damage, the crisis, the violence, the signs of decay and can you imagine that life still lingers there? Do you dare to believe—and even trust—that the power of life does not ever go underground in such a way that God cannot revive?” Can we trust that life is *always* possible with God? Can we find hope, and even faith, when we are sitting in a valley of dry bones and literal death? God doesn’t ask us to believe the situation will get better. God asks us to believe that life itself will not, in the end, cower under the pressure of human destruction. Abundant life persists. This is what makes it eternal.

But even when we can muster that kind of trust, God asks for more. God commands Ezekiel to *prophecy* to the bones. Why? This radical hope

that God calls us into is something not only to hold, but to *proclaim*. Prophesying is often seen as a method of tearing down systems of power, but here prophecy is a message of hope-filled redemption that takes place by and through the Spirit of God. Ezekiel was told to call upon the Spirit of God to give those old bones new life. A question we need to ask ourselves is, “When was the last time I called upon the Spirit of God?” Another question we should consider is, “Where is fear or cynicism holding me back from seeing life right now? And can I find glimmers of God’s abundance even in this valley of the shadow of death?” Again. This is not a zombie story. This isn’t about reanimating something that’s old. It’s bringing something to *new* life. It’s about resurrection, and that’s what Lenten season prepares us for in the first place. May the power of God’s Spirit breathe new life into us so that we can claim hope even during times of trouble.