

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

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**Less is More**

Ezekiel 37:1-10

God is hard to keep up with. We need look no further than the prophet Ezekiel to see how very true this statement is. As Ezekiel is sitting by a river one day God literally blows past him. Witnessing this divine churning, turning, whirlwind of fire, Ezekiel learns two things right off: that God is on the move and that Ezekiel is about to get swept up. And swept up he is. For, the Israelite people had been exiled and forced to leave their homeland behind. God, however, comes to them in this new land with a few things to say. Ezekiel becomes the Divine mouthpiece which means that from the moment he sees God tumbling and turning toward him his words and actions are no longer his own. He is now God's representative.

As a divine agent, God has him eat a scroll. God then orders him to play act a battle in the middle of town. God tells him to lay on his left side, then his right. The orders continue as God commands him to dig a hole through a wall and then burrow through. God demands that Ezekiel proclaim terrible doom onto the people time and time again. God orders him to slice a sword through his hair. Orders him to burn the hair. Orders him to show indifference when his wife dies. As we read Ezekiel's story the scenes, the commands, the "thus says the Lords," keep coming faster and faster. God even bodily sweeps Ezekiel up at will and drops him into different places altogether: into the Temple, into another part of town, into a valley of death. And this is where we find him: among dry bones. He must have been exhausted. But all of this racing and rushing in the story has led us here. As Ezekiel looks out over this desolate place, God asks him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And time stops.

You see, this is the first time that God has asked Ezekiel a questions and NOT then provided the answer. After thirty-six chapters of commands, demands, orders and announcements, God asks Ezekiel this questions, "Mortal, can these bones live?" and then God waits. The silence that follows the question is overwhelming. This is the same God who has literally stuffed Divine words down Ezekiel's throat and yet there is no divine pronouncement, no "thus says the Lord", no answers provided. Just the question hanging in the stillness.

Someone once said that when we look at human bones we are really contemplating the fate of humanity. When we look at our bones we see in them every sad condition of our lives. When we look into the valley of our lives we grieve over its dry and dusty places: our failed relationships, the loss of one we loved, the sins of our past. Each of us carries these dead places within ourselves and they can, indeed, leave us without hope. Ezekiel's vision, however, is broader even than these things. God is asking him about the entire community, about the whole house of Israel and so the vision pushes us to think about ourselves as more than individuals—as a group. So what are the dead and dry places in the community of God? In the church? Unfortunately, this is not a hard question. Scholars and sociologists alike continually warn us that the church is dying. Some, in fact, claim it is already dead.

We hear frightening statistics—such as that one in four pulpits are currently empty in the Presbyterian Church and on in every two are empty in the Catholic Church—and we begin to feel

death creep closer. When our church authorities yell, “Look at the empty pews around you,” in an attempt to show us that our good ole’ days are long past and our decline is imminent, we feel death begin to cover us. When we hear on the news that someone can praise their God and then murder his fellow soldiers and we are not at all certain that we Christians will have a unified or loving response. Or that our response will even matter, then death can overwhelm us. In the face of all of these bones, God’s same question hangs in the stillness: “Mortals, can these bones live?”

How does one answer such a question? How does one speak into such a silence? In the face of this deadened and exiled community, Ezekiel was courageous and answered God the only way he could. “Can these bones live?” you ask. “Can this hopelessness be turned around? O Lord God, you know.” In the face of our own fears about the church’s fate and the community’s end, we must pray to have this same courage—to respond to possible death by putting our trust in God. That’s really what the question is about. When God asked Ezekiel if the dead bones at his feet could live, God was asking if Ezekiel could have hope when hopelessness surrounded him, if Ezekiel trusted in God. Can the dead come to life? Can abject despair be swept away? These are questions about whether or not Ezekiel trusts God, about whether or not we trust God.

Ezekiel’s response, “Oh Lord, you know,” may sound too passive to our ears and less faithful than we would like. But in face his response is one that could only come from the deepest parts of his faith. He recognizes that he has no power or gifts to bring to the situation and—in his recognition of his own powerlessness—he affirms that God is in control, that even the bones at his feet are God’s and only God knows what will happen to them. If we let fear about the future of the church overwhelm us, we are being unfaithful. Rather, we need to recognize our own powerlessness and reaffirm that God is in control, that even our broken and sinful church is God’s and only God knows what will happen to it.

Recognizing God’s control and our lack of power does not allow us to push away problems. When facing a hurting and exiled community, Ezekiel still had a role. He recognized his own inability to act and he may have even doubted the possibility of dry bones coming alive but he did trust in God. Seeing this, God charges him to show this trust in his actions. Specifically, God tells Ezekiel to preach to the dead bones. You can almost hear God saying to a surprised Ezekiel, “And preach it like you mean it!” If we put our trust in God to bring dead bones back together then God is going to charge us to show our trust in our actions. If our trust is truly in God then we must live into this trust! In what we say and do we must believe that God is in control and that God can bring new hope. We are not a doomed and hopeless people! So we must not act like we are! Through God’s love and care for us we are a redeemed and hopeful people.

When we actively live out the hope and trust we have in God, we might find that old, dry bones can come together. That the dead may rise and life may be renewed. What we will most certainly find is that God will be moving among us. God alone has held our past and God alone holds our future. Our calling is NOT to a worried and fearful existence. Our calling is to trust and hope in the Lord: even when we have our doubts, even when the bones around seem very dry and very many.

Look at these windows around us. As we have been learning more about them have you noticed it? Here is St. Stephen, a deacon of the church, carrying the instruments of his death with the same hands as he carries the gospel message. Remember Paul? Holding the sword that killed him even as he offers Christ’s message. And Peter with the upside down cross right next to the church on a rock which he helped build. And on and on they go. Each is a sign of the claim our God of hope has on us. This is our heritage: hope when there seemed to be none! Those who came before us in this place knew this heritage and they have passed it on to us. As the community of this God there has been a demand

placed on us that we be filled with joyful hope in the face of bleakest outlooks. *We are this community.* Let us live like it! How do we do this? We live our lives with hope. When we leave this place, let's have people wonder at our attitude. Let's have them be struck by our joy. We should stand as a sign of God's hope in this world. Then, perhaps we too will see dead bones rise. Perhaps we too will have a role in God's new creating moments. Perhaps we too will be swept up. Amen.