



Can These Bones Live?

TEXT
Ezekiel 37:1-14

August 2, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Sally Wright

It showed up in my mailbox. A stick. With instructions. Please plant as soon as possible. Now, of course I had ordered this plant and was awaiting its arrival. But actually holding a seemingly lifeless stick in your hands, planting it in soil and expecting fruit next year? That seems like a stretch. I am still skeptical. Yet, I spent money on this plant because I have become a gardener during COVID. So, I planted this stick in soil, faithfully watered it and now, three months later, I have a stick with green leaves on it. It will be many more months before this plant turns into a bush and even more until I can harvest luscious, ripe blueberries. But it happens every day, seemingly dead, lifeless sticks and roots still have life in them.

So when the prophet Ezekiel prophesies the story of the dry bones, on the surface it seems like an odd text better suited for Halloween than a story of hope. But the image Ezekiel uses of God turning the dry bones of Israel into the people of Israel and breathing God's breath into them, can be a reminder to us that dry, seemingly lifeless things or even seemingly dry times, with the breath of God's spirit, can be holy.

A little context about Ezekiel: He was a priest turned prophet, part of the first wave of exiles after the Babylonian army conquered Jerusalem. He was trained as a priest because his whole family was a priestly family. Yet, when the Babylonian army conquered Jerusalem, they kidnapped Ezekiel and took him to a foreign land, far away from the Temple in Jerusalem. Ezekiel experienced trauma, forced migration, removal of livelihood and purpose. In this new land, he was not able to do the thing he was trained to do, which was to be a priest. Within Ezekiel's context, his prophesies attempt to answer the question of *why* the Babylonian Army conquered Israel and also to remind the people of God's promises and the hope of restoration. Ezekiel uses the image of the Israelites dry bones to remind them of the promises that God will one day breathe the breath of life within them again. And to remind them that they are still God's people, even in exile.

Watching Village Church a few Sundays ago, towards the end of Dr. Elisa Bicker's postlude, there was a scene where the camera went from close in and focused in on Dr. Bickers playing. The camera then

widened the focus and zoomed out onto the entire sanctuary. I found myself in tears. These 30 seconds put an image on the screen that perfectly described what I have been feeling within myself and hearing from some of you. I saw the empty pews as dry, potentially lifeless, because you were not in them. I felt the isolation of these COVID days, the sadness of the loss of funerals and grief support, and the making smaller of celebrations like weddings and graduation parties. The excitement of the newness and the innovation of worshipping online suddenly dropped. In that moment, I missed church.

It is true, although, we have been worshipping in the sanctuary on Sunday mornings. But really we have been worshipping at home, on our computers and mobile devices. The pews are bare, empty. The production magic that our team at Village has put together has helped us all worship together even through stay-at-home orders and social distancing. We have still had incredible music, faithful preaching and thoughtful liturgy. Together, we have still talked about the matters of the day, and we have named the hurts in our world. We have also pointed together to God's promised day.

But this type of worship has been different for most of us. Very different!

What once fed me about church and expecting to experience God, I must now find in my home on my couch, and my home does not include each of you. In addition, I miss the multisensory experience of attending in-person worship: seeing the sanctuary, hearing the music and words, smelling the coffee and the flowers, feeling hugs and handshakes from our friends. I miss feeling the organ vibrate my body in accordance with the tonal frequency. I even miss hearing us all together take a collective breath before the first sung note of a hymn — or when we are praying the Lord's prayer, and we pause together ever so slightly when we say, "Our Father, who art in heaven ..."

These are some of the things that we have had to say goodbye to — for a time. I have heard you feel like these dry bones that Ezekiel is talking about. On phone calls with some of you, I have heard you say to me, "It has been lonely." "I miss Wednesday night dinners." "I just want to be in worship again." "I miss my PW sisters." Yes. I hear that. I feel that. I miss you. I hear you missing each other.

It is OK to name this grief. It is OK to admit how hard it has been to change the way we experience worship in such a short amount of time. One week in March, we thought this would last two weeks, maybe a month at maximum. Four months later, we still don't know when we can gather back together.

Hearing Tom's sermon last week, I wonder if this grief might not be a spiritual blinder to us in these days.

Even in this grief, in the isolation and loneliness of these COVID days, you have also expressed ways the pandemic has brought God's breath into dry things. I have heard from many of you that you have found deeper relationships within your family. The time spent at home with nowhere to go has caused an intimacy to grow among parents and kids; and deeper connections among spouses and partners. I have counseled some of you during tough relationship moments in the past where now the time together has brought a renewed sense of life and hope. Some of you have instituted weekly "Family Zoom Calls" and reading to grandkids over Facetime. Some have started writing real-deal, snail-mail letters to communicate family genealogy and history. I have heard of one of you starting a pen-pal relationship with a prisoner through writeaprisoner.com. Who knew the mail could become a highlight of the day?

Even as we have worshipped online, God has breathed God's breath. Let's lift up the creative work of the music staff and the Brady Bunch style *Amazing Grace* this morning. Some of you have enjoyed the intimacy of pastors and worship leaders leading worship right in your own living room. Some of you have told us about the conversation and faith formation that has happened because you all worship together at your house. VOA

folks have been able to worship at VOM; and VOM folk have been able to worship at VOA. God has breathed God's breath anew.

Our months dealing with COVID have not simply been anchored in the inconveniences of the pandemic. Our months dealing with COVID have also led to clarity understanding economic impact and hardship, the globalization of our world, supply chains and the real cost of treating minority groups differently. I have heard from some of you the change in perspective that you have gained; some of you have had more time to work on the issues that matter to you; some of you have started new projects aimed at mending hurts and bringing about God's promised day.

You have picked up new hobbies, like me and my blueberry stick. You have moved meetings outside under the trees instead of meeting inside; you have met through Curb-Side Family Dinners on Wednesdays and the Drive-Thru Ice Cream Social. You have been the hands and feet of Christ through giving food at the Drive-Thru Food Pantry. And more ideas are on their way for the fall.

Ezekiel's prophecy is a message of hope to us today just as it was 2500 years ago. Our God is big and can do amazing, wondrous things. Our God is the one who can take our dry bones and breathe God's breath into them and make them God's people. So we know that God will bring us back to the pews in our multiple worship sites. When the threat of

COVID-19 is managed, God will open the doors to allow groups to gather again, funerals to happen, weddings to get celebrated and space for us to visit our loved ones in the columbarium. God has put the breath of God's spirit within us, within this church, and among God's people.

In these days of COVID, join me in spotting the places God is breathing God's breath into dry things. Maybe you are planting a literal garden, or maybe these are the days that God is using to plant ideas of social justice, new ways to connect, new traditions and new family. When you see these movements of the Spirit, call me, email me, send me a letter. Let me know how God is breathing God's spirit among us.

So next summer, ask me about my blueberry bushes. Hopefully, I can share with you some of the sweetness of God's spirit breathing into sticks.

Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.