

**Decisions, Decisions:**  
Can These Bones Live?  
First Baptist Richmond, March 26, 2023  
The Fifth Sunday in Lent  
*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 around 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."*

If you were here last week you probably know why this Sunday's Old Testament lesson is the story of the dry bones, from Ezekiel 37. It's because this Sunday's Gospel lesson is the Raising of Lazarus, from John 11. The Old Testament lesson is chosen to accompany the Gospel lesson and there is no Old Testament lesson that provides better company for Lazarus, lying in his grave, than the dry bones of Ezekiel 37.

It seems to me that this is always the chapter we turn to in Ezekiel, although that's not entirely true. There are other readings on other Sundays from this strange Old Testament book. But if you've spent any time in Ezekiel at all you will agree with me: it's strange! It's full of apocalyptic visions, with wheels within wheels, covered with eyes all around, and that's just the first chapter. You have to be truly committed to make it all the way to chapter 37, but if you do you will be rewarded with this vision of the Valley of Dry Bones: one preachers have turned to again and again when their churches become like Lazarus in his grave—so dead that they begin to stink. You'll be glad to know that's *not* why I'm turning to this passage today. I'm turning to it because it's one of today's lectionary readings, chosen years ago by a committee that didn't even know our church. They picked it because it pairs nicely with the Raising of Lazarus, but maybe

all of today's readings have something to do with how God feels about death and what God intends to do about it in the end.

If you think about it long enough and hard enough you may remember that Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian Exile at a time when God's people had mostly given up. If you can picture them shaking hands with him after synagogue on the Sabbath you can almost hear them say, "Thank you for your sermon today, Preacher. We appreciate your optimism. But God is not going to take us back to Jerusalem. This Exile has been going on for decades now and it doesn't show any signs of letting up. We might as well admit that we are going to die out here in this wretched desert."

Discouraging words for a preacher. Ezekiel may have had trouble sleeping that night. He may have tossed and turned until the Lord came to him in a vision, and carried him out to a valley full of dry bones. "What do you think, Mortal? Can these bones live?" "I don't know," Ezekiel said (telling the truth). "But you do. What do you think?" And the Lord said, "I think this is how my people feel right now. Like dry bones. Like people whose hope is dead and gone." "But how about you?" Ezekiel asked, timidly. "How do you feel?" "Oh, just the opposite!" the Lord said. "I feel like something wonderful is about to happen." And then he said, "Prophecy to these bones, Ezekiel, 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.'"

When I read that passage last Monday I noticed for the first time that God is going to do all these things *so that* his people will know he is the Lord. He says he will lay

sinews on those dry bones, and cause flesh to come upon them, and cover them with skin, and put breath in them, and they will live, and *then* they will *know* that he is the Lord.

But what I wondered when I was looking at this passage last Monday was whether it could work the other way around. What if you got to know the Lord first, and when you did the breath came back into your body? What if that's when you stood up, alive and well? And what if it didn't happen *so that* you would know the Lord is God, but *because* you knew that the Lord is God?

Every morning for years now I have prayed the same prayer for this church. I say: "Fill the pews with people who love you and long to sing your praises; fill the offering plates with the generous gifts of a grateful people; fill the classrooms with disciples who lean over open Bibles, eager to hear and obey your Word; fill the hallways with brothers and sisters who greet one another with hugs and laughter. Fill us with your love until it overflows onto the streets of our city and into every surrounding suburb, until your kingdom comes, and your will is done, in Richmond as it is in heaven." That's my prayer, and when I pray it I can almost picture it: this church, fully alive, bursting at the seams, bringing in the Kingdom. But I get that picture from reading the Bible, not the newspaper.

If you read the newspaper you will learn that the church in America is in decline: that membership is down, attendance is down, and giving is down. You will learn that three out of ten Americans claim no religious affiliation at all, and a good many more don't claim to be Christian.<sup>i</sup> In fact, if you continue the trajectory of any of those trends you can see Christianity dropping completely off the bottom of the charts in the next few decades. I hear those kinds of dire predictions at some of the conferences I attend. I read

them on the blogs of the church leadership gurus. It's as if the whole household of Christianity is saying, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are cut off completely."

But I'm not there yet. I haven't given up. I'm still praying that prayer. But maybe for the first time I'm thinking that instead of lying around waiting for the Lord to bring dry bones back to life so that we will know he is God, we could get to know that he is God and begin to feel the life coming back into our dry bones.

For example: let's imagine that a nice couple living just down the street wakes up one morning and decides that they want to get to know God. Who knows why? Maybe because they talked to one of you. But for whatever reason they decide that that's what's been missing from their life: God! And so they set out to get acquainted. They start reading the Bible, saying their prayers, looking for resources on the Internet. And let's imagine that it works: that within six months they are so in love with God they can't talk about anything else. One day the wife says to the husband, "I just wish there were some place we could go to sing God's praises. I wish there were other people who felt the way we do." Her husband says, "I know a place like that! I jogged by it this morning. It's called church, and it's open at 11:00 on Sunday."

Because these people have never been to church. They don't know anything about it. But as I said they live just down the street, and when Sunday morning comes they come here, and when they get inside they can't believe it. Here is a room full of people just like them, people who know and love the Lord. And after the prelude and call to worship the people around them pick up *books* and begin to sing. It's the strangest thing! But even though this couple doesn't know the words or the tune they can tell that

these people are pouring out their hearts to the God they love.

And it's wonderful.

When the service is over someone next to them says, "I can tell you really enjoyed worship today." "Yes!" they say. "Do you do this every week?" "Yes, and if you come a little earlier you can join us for Sunday school at 9:45; there's room in my class. And you can come to Wednesday night supper at 5:00; please be my guest. And you can join us in our mission of bringing heaven to earth; I'm happy to tell you more." And before you know it this couple is completely involved. They're singing hymns louder than anyone else in church; they're dropping *very* generous checks into the offering plate; they're leaning over open Bibles in Sunday school, eager to hear and obey God's word; they're greeting their new brothers and sisters in the hallways with hugs and high fives. It's wonderful! They feel it. And their love for God and for their church is contagious. It spills out onto the streets of the city and goes with them wherever they go, until everybody who knows them knows God.

Of course, not everyone lives just down the street from the church. Some of you who are watching from home this morning live hundreds of miles away. Others are unable to attend for other reasons. But that shouldn't keep you from participating.

For years now I've had this idea that along with those who *come to church* on Sunday morning there are those who could *be the church* right where they are. That may have been the idea when we started broadcasting our services back in 1986. But watching a worship service on television is not the same thing as being here, so here's my thought: 1) What if we continue to create content and send it to you through the airwaves or the Internet, and 2) what if you create community by inviting one or more friends or

family members to watch it with you, and 3) what if you collaborate with us in our mission of bringing heaven to earth by finding a way to “bring it” right where you are? Got that? Content, Community, Collaboration. Those are the three “C’s” of something I call “Microchurch,” and you can start one anywhere.

Let’s say that you live at 123 Elm Street. You could call it, “The Church at 123 Elm Street.” And let’s say that you live there alone, that you don’t have family members who can sit down with you and watch the Sunday morning broadcast. No problem. Phone a friend just as the service is beginning and watch it together. Stay on the line through the whole thing. Say “Amen!” when the preacher makes a good point. And then, when it’s over, take some time to pray for each other.

That’s church!

But of course if you can watch it with two or three other people that’s better. You might even bring the makings of a simple lunch. You could eat together after worship. You could pray for each other after that. And then you could take up an offering and use it right where you are to bring heaven to earth. But if you do that please let us know! That’s how the Microchurch movement will gain momentum. Send us your pictures, tell us your stories. Say, “This is how we brought it this week at the Little Church on Elm Street!” We’ll post those pictures and stories on our website, we’ll publish them in our newsletter. You’ll be famous. But, of course, if you can’t think of anything to do with your offering you can always send it to us. We are working to bring heaven to earth every single day and we could always use your help.

Now, all of this is based on two huge assumptions: 1) that there are people out there (and in here) who really want to know the Lord, and 2) that knowing the Lord

would lead to the revitalization of the church. Neither of those things may be true, but if not they should be. Take that first part, for instance: really wanting to know the Lord. If that's not true *for you* it should be. Do you know why? Because, in John's Gospel, in various places, Jesus says that he has come so that we might have life that is abundant, overflowing, and everlasting. Who doesn't want a life like that? But then he tells us how to get it. In John 17:3, as he is praying for his disciples, he says, "This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." That verb, "to know," is the most intimate verb in the Bible. And here Jesus seems to suggest that knowing the God revealed in Jesus Christ, and sharing in that intimacy, is how you experience abundant, overflowing, and everlasting life.

And what about that second assumption, that knowing God might lead to the revitalization of the church? I can think of a few Bible passages that speak to that. One is that verse from 2 Chronicles 7 that says, "If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, *seek my face*, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." Another is from Jeremiah 31, where God promises to make a new covenant with his people. "I will put my law within them," he says, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another or say to each other, 'Know the Lord,' for *they shall all know me*, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord, for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

That sounds like revitalization to me, like dry bones coming back to life. And it sounds like it all begins with knowing the Lord. But I could be wrong about that. I have been wrong before. I tried to bring one of my former churches back to life and a fellow

pastor finally told me, “That church isn’t dead enough yet.” Resurrection doesn’t happen until something dies. Maybe that’s why Jesus waited four days to raise Lazarus. Maybe that’s why the Lord showed Ezekiel a valley full of dry bones. Maybe the church in America isn’t dead enough to be resurrected but maybe it is alive enough to hear this word and do something about it.

Decisions, decisions.

Maybe there is enough breath left in your body to *decide* here and now, that you will do everything in your power to know the Lord.

And then let’s see what happens.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2023

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/>