

March 13, 2005
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11 (selected verses)
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“The Power of Hope”

Some years ago on the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Stalingrad, an Austrian television journalist named Seledec went to Russia to visit the sight of one of the bloodiest battles of the Second World War. In the winter of 1942-43, two Russian armies cut off the German Sixth Army, which had been ordered by Hitler to hold its ground and not retreat. Over two months, the Russian army and the Russian winter wiped out 250,000 soldiers of the German Sixth Army, a thousand tanks, countless pieces of artillery, planes and supplies.

A guide took Seledec to a site outside the city where the soldiers had dug in during the battle. The trenches and bunkers could still be seen. Near Penschanka, the guide pointed across the fields. At first, Seledec did not notice anything but the intense blue of the sky and the slope of the vast steppes before him. Then he saw it: the gullies and slopes of the steppes were littered with sun-bleached bones. Seledec said, “There in the open fields, all the way to the horizon, are the skeletons of human beings. Just lying there in the open fields. I don’t mean a few. There are hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands...arms, legs, pelvic bones, skulls, and an occasional rib.” (*The New Yorker*, article by Timothy Ryback).

Such scenes of devastation have been repeated in modern history more often than we want to believe. Who can forget Matthew Brady’s photographs of Civil War battlefields or the killing fields of Cambodia where bone lies upon bone? Such scenes grant a certain grim realism to Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones.

When the Lord gave the prophet Ezekiel the vision, Israel was in exile. The Assyrians had carried the Northern Kingdom of Israel away into exile over 125 years before the destruction of Jerusalem. Now mighty Babylon had devoured Judah and picked her bones clean. The temple was destroyed, the walls of the city of Jerusalem were torn down, and the city itself was a burned out town. As far as the exiles were concerned, a dream had died. Yahweh had died with it. How do you hold onto to a dream when there is no future? How do you hold onto faith when everything around you seems to deny its truth?

How do the people of Palestine and Israel believe that peace is a possibility when those in power will not bend? How can the children of the Sudan refugee camps understand what it means when their parents talk about harvesting crops or having a place called home? Their children have never known either. How does a child in Second Presbyterian Church who has grown up with everything except her parent’s time and attention know what it means when her mom in a drunken stupor says, “I love you?” How does a student alone in a dorm room hold on when he has failed and

feels he can't go home to face his parents? How does a social worker not give up on working with a family with no education, few skills, poor judgment, a father in prison and the mother has just lost another job. At some time or another in our lives, we face situations that seem beyond hope.

The Lord asks the prophet, "Son of man, can these bones live?" The prophet looked at the bones and saw they were very dry. There was no life in them. The possibility of life had left them a long time before. If it depended on the people, there was no hope. When Lazarus fell sick, his sisters Mary and Martha sent for their friend Jesus. They knew he could help. By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead four days. Now there was nothing that he could do. Even Jesus couldn't fix this situation. When Jesus told them to remove the stone, practical Martha protested because there would be a terrible odor. Lazarus was as dead as he was going to get. No hope of life!

Some of our problems seem beyond solution. Before we are going to find our way in the midst of life's most difficult situations, we are going to have to admit that we are powerless to change things. We cannot stop another person from drinking. We cannot make someone else change. We cannot make an unhappy person join our group. We cannot change the results on the test for cancer or stop death when it presses against our door. By ourselves, we cannot stop child abuse, social violence or end the war. We cannot force someone to believe in Christ.

We can recognize our helplessness and our need. We can turn our situation over to God. As Ezekiel said, "Lord, only you know the answer." When we turn our difficulties over to the Lord, when we place in God's hands the burdens that we can no longer bear, when we give to the Lord the needs of our community, city and world, we prepare ourselves to see what God is doing. When we let go, God takes hold. When we see God as the force behind all things and in all things, then we get a fresh perspective.

Ezekiel knew that Israel's future was in God's hands. Ezekiel gave himself to be used by God. God told Ezekiel to prophesy. Ezekiel prophesied. Suddenly, the bones came together; sinews joined bone to bone; flesh covered the bones. Then God breathed into them the breath of life. The vision is not about reanimating the dead. It is about the rebirth of hope. The vision invites us to see that God is working all around us for life even in the midst of death. God is creating new hope even in the midst of despair.

God is the god of the resurrection. As Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live. Whoever lives and believes in me shall never die." God chooses to be known as the God who creates life out of death and hope out of despair. In Jesus Christ we see the fullness of the revelation of God. What we see in Jesus is a God who loves the unlovable, who creates a future where there was only a past, who forgives the unforgivable, who treats the sinner like a saint and defeats the power of death.

The God of the resurrection comes to us even when we try to deny God's power. The story is told by Philip Yancy of a group of young Christians who unfolded a banner on Easter Sunday 1983 in Red Square. The banner read in Russian, "Christ is Risen!" The Russian guards tore up the banner and arrested the students. Less than a decade after the guards stopped that public display of faith in the God of the resurrection things are different. In Red Square on Easter Sunday one can hear the echoing the traditional Easter greeting, "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" (Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* p.256.)

How does God bring about this new life? How does God bring hope where there has been no hope? In Hebrew, the word for wind, breath and spirit is the same word, "ruah." The prophet plays upon the word "ruah" in all its meanings. The single word for wind, breath and spirit reminds us of the vital connection between the physical and the spiritual, the natural and the supernatural, and God and humanity. God uses what is ordinary to accomplish the extraordinary. God uses Ezekiel to proclaim the word of hope to a defeated people. God uses the bumbling disciples to create the church. God uses you and me to bring new life into being.

A man I know was diagnosed with a terrible debilitating neurological disease. It changed his personality. His once positive outlook became dark and depressed. He was combative and difficult to handle. His family persisted in loving and caring for him. Over the years, they led him to accept his situation, to find spiritual peace, and to trust that God had a new life for him through death.

In a world in which we cannot predict what will happen next and in which random violence breaks out in courtroom and church, we need to be a people who nurture hope. In his book, *Educating Congregations*, Charles Foster states, "If the church is to have a vision that infuses our lives with hope for the future and that mobilizes our energies in that vision, we need a context in which people might encounter the creative and redemptive activity of God at work." (p. 122). In short we need to be a community of faith that doesn't just transmit information about God, but provides the opportunity to encounter the God who created the world out of nothing and brings the dead to life. In worship and in service, we meet this God.

All of us are deeply concerned about the needs of latch key children. The Child Development Center in my former congregation had mini-buses that picked up 120 after-school children from five elementary schools to spend time in the church's after-school programs. There were also many children in the middle school near our church whose families could not find a place for their children and could not afford after-school care. Members of the mission committee worked with several other churches in the neighborhood to develop a program at the school to provide support, counseling, healthy activities and mentoring to these after-schoolers. The program reached out to some of the most at-risk children in the system. At the end of the year, they held a graduation celebration in the multi-purpose room of our church. There was cake and ice cream, games and prizes, gifts and songs. Each youth had to write one thing they learned in the after-school program. I will never forget one girl who was

full of excitement because she had learned how to write her whole name. It was a simple, unforgettable moment of the rebirth of hope in me. Because of this program and other programs that brought a caring and hopeful community into this once mediocre school, *Time* magazine named this school national Middle School of the year.

Sometimes we live like people who have lost hope! We think that people can't change, that one person can't make a difference, that the rich don't care about the poor and the poor don't want to help themselves, that death is the end of everything, that we can't do anything about the violence in our society and that the conflict in the Middle East will never end. We need the God of hope, the God the resurrection, to do radical heart surgery on us. We need to be raised from our dead faith to embrace the words of Jesus, "Those who live and believe in me shall never die." Sometimes the things that need to change most are our own doubt and despair.

All around us are the dry bones waiting for someone to hear the word of resurrection and see how God's Spirit comes to wake the dead and breathe new life into old bones.