

## “Begin, Again.: Can These Bones Live?”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

October 11, 2020

*Mortal, can these bones live? I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.*

These words spoken to the prophet Ezekiel serve as the bookends of a dramatic and jarring divine encounter. The scene is well-situated in this spooky month—a valley filled with very dry bones. But this is not a random assortment of anonymous skeletons. God tells the prophet whose they are—*these are the bones of your people*. The whole house of Israel. The whole community of faith. These bones belong to you. A dusty, deadly desert filled with lost friends and former glory. The context of this passage is collective crisis. The question that God asks is both urgent and unsettled. This shadowed valley is the quintessential vision of human disaster.

We know this valley. For some of us it is a passing place of temporary pain; a waystation on the wilderness journey. For others, the valley is home; the condition is chronic, the pain permanent. For all of us, recent months have drawn us into this canyon of chaos in newly distressing ways. We have seen the power of death, both in the untimely and inexplicable ceasing of human life and in the brokenness that reveals those more subtle deaths that divide, distract, and ultimately seek to destroy the hope that is within us. We know this valley, and we know it better now than we once did.

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Bookends of divine encounter. The space between them is the context of our ministry. What does life look like between the question and the promise? What is the mission of a church in this zone of the unknown, this arena of liminality, this gap in time and distance in space where we have been living as a congregation, as a nation, and as a world in recent months?

It's commitment time here at Second Presbyterian Church. Depending on your church background or personal history you may be more familiar with the term “stewardship.” Regardless of the descriptor, these three weeks mark an annual season in the life of our congregation tuned to intentional reflection on what has been, bold dreaming about what lies ahead, and prayerful discernment of the role each of us has to play in God's vision for our community of faith. Each year, we take a little time to tend to these important tasks in our life together. Each year, I seek faithful, scriptural ways to remind us all of the theological and practical importance of the financial giving that enables the vital and vibrant ministries of this church. To say, with as much eloquence as I can—Second depends on you taking responsibility for its future, doing your part to continue its story, believing this place matters enough to commit yourself to it.

And, each year I pray for the emergence of a thematic focus that will inspire and motivate us. I had a wonderful theme selected at the beginning of this calendar year. Crisp. Clear. Compelling. But, as it has done to so many of our plans, 2020 threw a curveball. And so, with the wonderful leadership of John Koppitch and our Commitment Committee, we discerned that the call of the church in the fall of 2020 is to begin, again. More to come on that. But, before we can fully explore what this new beginning might mean, there is a question that I believe we must face.

### Can these bones live?

The question invites honest and vulnerable soul-searching that goes to the heart of who we are. These bones belong to you. What of life is left in them? They're good bones but they've aged quite a bit, depleted by the decades. Still, the question beckons.

What is begging to be born in the pile of bones, waiting expectantly for a burst of new life?

The prophet responds to the divine question with words of prayerful expectation: *O Lord God, you know*. This is when miraculous movement begins. It happens when this human agent of divine wonder speaks hope into a valley of despair, life into the shadows of death. Speak to the bones. Tell them that there is still work for them to do, still life for them to live, still joy for them to experience. God could have used any means of restoration, but the choice of the sacred is to empower the human voice as a channel for divine truth. Only then does life begin to stir in those dry bones.

The core theological conviction of our faith is the belief in a God who brings life out of death. As Luke Powery, Dean of Duke Chapel, writes on this passage, “The walking-dead zombies do not halt resurrection because being dead is fertile soil into which the Spirit can breathe new life.” As a resurrection people, we cling to the Spirit of renewal even as we release what we no longer must carry to make room for what God has in store for us. We who worship and seek to follow the Risen Christ know deep in our souls that those dry bones can live—but only if the Spirit of God is breathed afresh in the valley of death. Some years ago, I attended worship with a friend who had invited me to visit his church. I don’t remember the sermon title, but I know it included the word *resurrection* and that it was during the season of Easter. And so, it surprised me when the preacher began to explain to us that Gospel stories of resurrection were to be understood as metaphors rather than actual events—stories made up by Jesus’ disciples to account for his untimely death. About that time, I heard a voice from several rows behind me, quiet at first but slowly gaining strength. As she continued, I could make out the words, and recognized them immediately, words of the Apostle Paul—“if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” Now, I don’t generally

recommend interrupting sermons—but this was a worship moment I will never forget.

Let me be clear. If we do not believe that God is capable of raising life out of death, then the church of Jesus Christ has nothing to offer a context, a culture, a country that looks increasingly like that valley of dried up bones. But...if this proclamation of resurrection is the heart of our message, then ours is an essential voice of prophetic and pastoral power. You know where I stand. I trust that the breath, the wind, the spirit, the *ruach* of God can, does, and will resurrect the bones of what has been.

**I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.**

Over time, this promise must become our north star. The church of Jesus Christ is exactly that—“of” Jesus Christ. It does not belong to us. We belong to God. Our essential and only task is to be faithful stewards of the gifts of Christ and the mysteries of God. This liminal moment of both loss and potential invites us to ask what that means in new and exciting ways. Where is the spirit of God calling us to let go of tired assumptions and find new life? In what ways are we, right now, called to risk something significant for the sake of the ministry and mission that God has given us?

I serve on the board of a faith-based institution that is just a few years older than Second Presbyterian Church and, like our church, blessed with an endowment. As with all such institutions, leaders have been asking hard questions in recent months—questions about financial stability in the face of pandemic losses, questions of core mission, questions of our role in the work of justice and equity. At our board meeting this, reports from staff and committees spoke to all these concerns. After a concerning financial report, we took up a discussion on possible budget cuts. It was then that a member of the board raised his voice, I think for the first time in my three years serving with him. He spoke softly, his words a bit muffled and shaky. But his message was abundantly clear. *My family has loved this institution for four generations. This place is in our hearts, souls,*

*and giving. I could get in trouble for this, but it's how I feel, so here it goes: I would rather see us fulfill our mission for the next five years than last another fifty if it means avoiding what God is calling us to do.* Suffice to say, his words reframed our conversations. Can these bones live?

It is a time, I think, for asking the kinds of questions that could get us into trouble, for taking bold steps, for balancing our cautious prudence with the kind of courage that tugs at us now, that whispers to us in the middle of the night—this is the moment, this is your one chance at life on this earth. Don't wallow in the valley of dusty bones and miss it. Can these bones live? Like the prophet Ezekiel, we can't say for certain. Only God knows. We see through a glass dimly in the best of times, and right now it is as if someone has turned out the lights on the other side of the glass.

And yet, God has promised us a spirit of life. To refuse to receive it is to reject resurrection. To accept it is to join God on a journey that is sure to transform us all. We'll lose some things. We'll grieve the losses. Redemption does not come without real cost. But the abundant life that awaits us is, I believe, worth it all. So, in this liminal space and in the new day that will surely dawn, let us serve God without fear. Let us follow Christ who brings life into even the deepest valleys of driest bones. Let us trust the Spirit whose will for all creation is renewal, redemption, resurrection. Let us prepare ourselves and our church for the breath of God that whispers...shouts....begin, again. Amen.