

Trusting in Possibilities

A Sunday Morning Message on February 1, 2026

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Rev. Ruth Shilling Hainsworth

So, here we are together again after two Sundays of snow cancellations. Wow! That hasn't happened in years! Needless to say, I missed being here in our beautiful sanctuary with all of you. I admit the technology is a tad easier when I broadcast from home, but it's just not the same as when we're all here together. Community matters. A lot.

When I chose this scripture text for today's sermon, I had an entirely different take on this text from Ezekiel in mind. That's because I anticipated this would be the sermon just before the Annual Meeting and this text lends itself well to the kinds of things we talk about in the Annual Meeting as we review all we have accomplished and then move into some of our thoughts and plans for the year ahead. But, as you may already know if you read the special Weekend Update email when I confirmed we would be meeting for worship, I also explained that in consultation with our Church Council, we decided to postpone the Annual Meeting until the weather makes it more likely we will have a good turnout for that conversation! So, here we are. We're also postponing Communion until next Sunday since this is also Missions Sunday and we needed to bless our food donations so we can get them on their way! So, Communion will be next Sunday, a fitting conclusion for our Homeless Awareness Vigil Weekend at Sunday's worship. Then, the Annual Meeting will make its appearance at last on Sunday, February 15. Fingers crossed for the weather for *that* weekend!!

So, back to Ezekiel. When I decided to do this brief sermon series on the Old Testament prophets, I knew Ezekiel had to be part of the conversation. As biblical scholar Gale Yee writes in *The People's Bible*,

“reading Ezekiel is a ‘trip’ in more ways than one.”¹ This is because many of Ezekiel’s prophetic visions are so fiercely and vividly wild that some scholars have wondered if he was recording what were actually intoxicant induced hallucinogenic experiences. Yee thinks that his crazy visions were induced at least in part, not by hallucinogens but by the traumatic experiences he went through when Jerusalem was captured and destroyed and he was taken into captivity in Babylonia. He was among the first group sent and his life circumstances changed immediately and dramatically as he went from being a priest in Solomon’s Temple to a captive in Babylon. It’s easy to imagine he was distraught and traumatized, his heart broken. This context is important to understand when considering any of Ezekiel’s visions, something especially true for the text we read for today.

This is the famous vision of the valley of dry bones, the very one which gave rise to the popular song “Dem Bones.” It is not, as I thought, an African-American Spiritual but was actually written, lyrics and music, by two brothers, James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamund Johnson. It was first recorded in 1928 by the Myers Jubilee Singers in 1928. It’s chorus – *Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones* – describes perfectly Ezekiel’s first vision of the valley of dry bones in verses 1-3. God leads Ezekiel to a valley and all he can see is bones – human bones – dried out and desiccated – as far as the eye could see. Then, after having Ezekiel walk through the dry bones, God asks him, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Used to God’s weird visions by now, Ezekiel was not about to give God a straight answer. Instead, he says to God, “O Lord God, you know.” I always loved this answer from Ezekiel as he is so clearly hedging his bets. God straight up asks him a yes or no question which he manages to avoid answering. Instead, he turns the tables back on God by saying, “you know.” Thus, he invites God to say more. And God does. God said to him, “Prophecy to these

¹ Gale A. Yee, “Ezekiel,” *The People’s Bible*, © 2009, Fortress Press, p. 901.

bones, 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.” The prophecy continues with the explanation of how this will happen as sinews and flesh will cover the bones once more and then God will put breath into them. Then, they will know, as the prophecy ends, that God is the Lord.

So, Ezekiel does as God commanded him and made the prophecy to the dry bones at which point he notes a noise described in the text as a “rattling” as the bones came together, bone to bone. Then sinews knitted the dry bones together and flesh covered them, but they did not yet live. (Sounds like some kind of horror movie at this point, doesn’t it? *Ancient Valley of the Living Dead* maybe.) But God’s not done yet. God says to Ezekiel, “prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.” Once again, Ezekiel did as God directed and “the breath came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.” At this point, thank goodness, God explains to Ezekiel the meaning behind this vision. The dry bones are “the whole house of Israel,” defeated, broken and dead. God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to them one more time, to tell them that God will restore the entire house of Israel back to their beloved land. God will bring them back from the dead, if that is how long it takes, that so many have already died in battles lost, that so many will die waiting for God to intervene. God promises them, “I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.”

I will put my spirit within you and you shall live! This is God’s promise to God’s beloved people through Ezekiel, the prophet who was used to crazy visions. I love that about this story. This is a crazy vision and God needed someone very unconventional to see it as a vision and not just some apocalyptic nightmare. God knew that Ezekiel, being Ezekiel, would be totally open to this whole notion of an entire valley of dead bones coming back to life just because God’s

breath gave them life once more. Ezekiel immediately understood the meaning of this vision. No matter how bad things seemed in the moment, God wasn't done yet. New life, new possibilities unimagined were still out there waiting to come to life – maybe even in the process of coming true right in that moment. Israel wasn't dead. It looked dead as her people had been ruthlessly defeated and brutalized by the Babylonian armies. But God wasn't finished with them yet. Not by a long shot. And this extraordinary vision God gave to Ezekiel made that crystal clear. In other words, God gave Ezekiel a message of hope in the midst of the worst kind of valley of despair. Everything seemed dead, looked dead, but it wasn't. Ezekiel's job now was to convince the people that God's promise for new possibilities for them was true. All the people needed to do was trust. Trust God to keep God's promise, extraordinary though it was.

You can probably see why I thought this would be the perfect story to use as a set up to the Annual Meeting. It's a story about trust – trusting in God as we plan for the future. Good message for the Annual Meeting, right? Okay. Well, hold on to that thought for the 15th. But for right now, today, I want us to consider Ezekiel's vision from a new perspective, one that we have all encountered on our television screens for past several weeks. No, we haven't seen massive valleys of dry bones. No, we've seen for ourselves something much, much better. We've seen massive protest marches in major cities and small towns across our country. We've seen hundreds of thousands of people just like us taking to the streets to protest the inhuman and illegal treatment of immigrants and the people trying to help them. In Minneapolis, they're out in sub-zero temperatures singing, chanting, praying and, we now know twice over, risking their own lives to do it. In Portland, Oregon and Portland, Maine, we're seeing clergy staring down armed ICE agents to protect their friends and neighbors who have accents when they speak, or who have brown or black skin or who practice a different religion. Same thing in Philadelphia and New

York City and Boston, Mass. Same thing in Hartford and Pittsburgh and Los Angeles and San Francisco. Same thing in Austin, San Antonio and Dallas, Texas. *Texas!!* Protests all over this country as with one voice, one breath, the people are saying ENOUGH!!! They are saying, we will not stand by to see innocent people terrorized and children used as bait to lure their families out of hiding. We will not tolerate all the violence threatened and sometimes carried out as the desire to terrorize all of us into submission becomes more visible with every passing day. We will not tolerate masked “agents” hiding their own identities while asking everyone for their “papers” no matter who they are.

I am so grateful to these people, especially the clergy who are out there on the front lines protesting, getting between demonstrators and the ICE agents so that they are the ones getting tear-gassed. I’m so proud of all the church people on those front lines alongside all the people of every age who are not part of any church but they recognize evil when they see it. Everyone – EVERYONE – has had enough. The dry bones of all the people who have just been trying to get along, just trying to survive have finally reached their limit and they are rising up and with one breath crying out for justice and for peace. For everyone. Not just the people the current administration in DC deems acceptable because of the color of their skin or the size of their bank accounts. The dry bones – our very own dry bones – are screaming ENOUGH! NO MORE! And the officials behind this intentional use of terror and intimidation tactics are quickly realizing they don’t work anymore. Once dry bones are alive, they won’t stop. They are breathing deeply the breath of God which is invigorating all of those people – and all of us if we let it – to do what needs to be done so that this country can become once again the shining beacon on a hill for the entire world. Dear ones, God is calling us to this new life – to receive the breath of new life, new hope, new possibilities – and do something, whatever that something might be.

Let's be clear, not everyone can or should be out there protesting in subzero temperatures. But we can all do something. We can call our Senators and our Representatives. Every day. We can volunteer in our community to help with urgent issues like housing insecurity as we will do with our Homeless Awareness Vigil next weekend. We can make donations to organizations on the ground working to reclaim this country for everyone. We can also support the work of local artists and artisans who remind us daily of the beauty of life all around – who help us bring hope and possibility into clearer focus.

What I am saying this morning, dear ones, in this situation like in every situation, no one can do everything – but everyone can do something. So that brings us to the one question facing every person here this morning and every person joining us in this moment virtually – What will YOU do? What will you do with God's breath coursing through your body – whatever age you are, whatever your health limitations are, whatever your financial realities are – everyone can do something. What will your something be? That dear ones is up to you – and you might want to invite God into the conversation on that point. I think you just might be really surprised what happens then. Amen.