

Imagine: Transformation

Ezekiel 37:1-14

While pastoring in Lexington I would do the occasional funeral at Camp Nelson a few miles from Nicholasville. It's an old Civil War Union Army supply depot now a federal cemetery.

It's one of those cemeteries, not unlike Arlington in Washington, D.C. or even Zachary Taylor here in Louisville that's full of row after row of gravestones all uniformly aligned.

If you stop and ponder it all, it's almost more than you can comprehend. It's sobering, if not surreal.

And so was the scene so many centuries ago, but only starker and certainly more chaotic.

There were bones everywhere. The scene the prophet Ezekiel looked out upon was a battlefield laid to waste.

In the midst of that, and as if to test him, God asked, "*Son of man, can these bones live?*"

"Only you know, Lord. After all, you alone are sovereign."

Ezekiel's response was faithful to the core. As tough as that scene was to take in, Ezekiel rested in the sovereign power of God.

Hope to the Hopeless and Life to the Lifeless

In a word, times were tough for the people of God. Jerusalem had been vanquished, the temple destroyed, and God's people driven into exile. It was a desperate time if there ever was one.

Into the mix of that God spoke a word of hope to the hopeless and breathed life into the lifeless.

Ezekiel and the rest of God's people found themselves in dire circumstances. You can't blame them for being hopeless. All they had known had been dramatically altered. They were left to wonder if God was anywhere to be found.

There was seemingly no way out of their predicament.

I love the story told of the man who was walking through a dark cemetery one night when he fell into an open grave. It had been prepared for a funeral the next day.

The man screamed for help, but to no avail. He jumped and tried to reach the top, but couldn't reach it. He clawed at the dirt, trying to make steps, but the ground was too hard. Finally, he sat down in the corner and decided to wait until morning.

It was not long until another man came walking along and fell into the same grave.

The first man simply sat in the corner and listened while the second man yelled for help. He reached for the top and couldn't make it. He clawed at the dirt walls trying to climb out, but to no avail.

Finally, in sympathy, the first man said to the second, *"There's no way you can get out of here."* And with that the second man jumped like he had never jumped before and got out of the grave.

A Valley of Dry Bones

For a long time God's people had run along right well. They were fat and happy, if you will, and were convinced that all of that would continue.

Then the Babylonians came along and disrupted everything. Theirs had become a valley of dry bones. Their circumstance had sucked the life right out of them. They were left to wonder if they'd ever be lifted from such a dark place.

Sometimes we're left to wonder that as well. Who of us hasn't stood at the grave of dashed hopes and dreams?

We face it all the time, the fleeting nature of life. I've said it often, *"We tread on much thinner ice than we'd ever care to admit."*

Health can turn on a dime. Relationships can sour. Even the stock market can take a nose dive.

One of the most devastating things about having our hopes and dreams pulled out from under us is the fear that we will never recover, that things will never get any better. That's certainly the way God's people felt exiled in faraway Babylon.

They had become like a valley of dry bones. They felt as though they had been cut off from all they had known. They even felt cut off from God.

Almost every one of us can bring to mind a time in life when it felt very much like a valley of dry bones. You may feel that way right now. It's no fun, is it?

Things at home might not be so swell. Your work is more drudgery than anything else. Things with the kids are strained at best. Maybe there's some health concern.

And in the midst of that you don't know where to turn, yet here you are, right here in worship. And as you worship you begin to sense that God desires to speak into your life.

God is asking, just like he did Ezekiel so many years ago, *"Do you believe these bones can live?"* How you answer makes all the difference.

Only By the Wonderworking Power of God

Ezekiel left it with God. He knew that such a thing like bringing the valley of dry bones to life could take place only by the wonderworking power of God. Ezekiel knew that only a miracle could make the valley of dry bones come alive again.

Ezekiel refused to be drug down by the reality of his situation, but rested in the ultimate reality that God was faithful.

If anything, the story of The Valley of Dry Bones is a story of hope.

In the end that's exactly what God brings. He offers life and certainly brings transformation.

The scripture talks about the bones beginning to rattle. They came together "*bone to bone.*" "*Tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them all.*"

We've sung it since our days as a child. "*The toe bone connected to the foot bone. The foot bone connected to the leg bone. The leg bone connected to the thigh bone. The thigh bone connected to the hip bone.*"

You get the idea. It is a sort of divine anatomy lesson.

In the end, the song declares, "*Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around.*"

God's word makes it happen. He speaks it and it takes place, just like at creation.

By God's word the bones were knit together and, just like he did at creation, God breathed life into them.

The wonderworking power of God's Spirit brought life, just as his Spirit brings life today.

The Fresh Air of God's Spirit

Here on Iron Man Weekend, there'll be a lot of people passing right out front of the church out of breath. Many will be gasping for breath.

Many of us are out of breath as well. We'd do well to take a breath, a breath of God's Spirit. It is "*fresh air*" for those who need it.

It is a "second wind" that brings transformation.

As we said just a second ago, at creation, God breathed life into that which he created.

In Genesis 1:7 we read, "*The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.*" (Genesis 1:7)

Jesus, in talking about the Spirit in John 3:8 likened the Spirit to the wind.

“The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” (John 3:8)

Of course, we are well-aware of *“the rush of a mighty wind”* at Pentecost giving life to the church.

“Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.” (Acts 2:2)

God’s Spirit makes all the difference in bringing life, even to the driest of bones.

The Apostle Paul sums it up right well in Romans 8:11.

“And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who lives in you.” (Romans 8:11)

The Spirit of God Always Brings Life

The Spirit of God always brings life.

The good news of hope for all who feel as though they are living through a valley of dry bones is that you **will** breathe again. God’s Spirit makes it so.

- What is the word of God for you?
- How is he forming you to become whole again?
- How is the Spirit, the very breath of God, moving in your life?
- How is that same Spirit calling you to carry on?

(Show Photo of *Saving Private Ryan*)

One of the more gripping war movies in recent time is *Saving Private Ryan*.

It’s the story of a group of soldiers in the aftermath of D-day who were ordered to find Private Ryan who was somewhere behind enemy lines.

Their orders were at the behest of General George Marshall. As the story goes all of Ryan’s brothers had died in the war and Marshall didn’t want his mother to lose her last son.

Saving Private Ryan is the story of the great sacrifices that took place in saving this one life. Captain John Miller, played by Tom Hanks, upon his dying breath grabbed Ryan and told him, “*Earn this.*”

Effectively, Miller told Ryan to carry on.

The movie ends with Ryan, played by Matt Damon, visiting the cemetery at Normandy Beach with his family decades later.

There in that midst of all those gravestones, a valley of dry bones, if you will, Ryan says to his wife, “*Tell me I am a good man.*”

Let’s watch that final scene.

(Show Video Clip)

We too are called to carry on.

Ryan did, as best he could. Israel did. This church can. We can. Let’s imagine just that—all in the transforming, life-giving power of God’s Spirit that raises us from the valley of dry bones to new life.