

Old Bones, New Body

A sermon preached on Ezekiel 37:1-14 by Emily Hull McGee
at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC on May 20, 2018

Can these bones live?

So asks God to the prophet Ezekiel in this vision we just read. It's a vision that emerges from a people marched to Babylon and scattered far from their homeland of Israel. For amidst those dry bones, Ezekiel seems to see dusty hopelessness, barren vision, forgotten expectations, withered souls, lifeless people. *Can these bones live?* God only knows, Ezekiel says.

Thousands of years and hundreds of miles away, God asks us even today: *can these bones live?*

We look around the valleys of our inner lives, and they are littered with fragments: unresolved anger, open wounds of grief, longings and groanings too deep for words, expectations for a life that hasn't unfolded the way we so dreamed. These bones seem to cry out for relief from the distractions, the relentless anxieties, the gnawing fear, the laziness or the speed in which we move, all the failures and ways we're sure we don't measure up. In this valley, we go hunting for a hit of productivity or pills, sex or screens, whatever we can find to numb our pain and loneliness. But **can** *these bones live?*

We scan the hollowed out spaces of our communal lives, and they are filled with fractures: relationships fraught with broken trust, suspicion and quick anger, resentment that simmers just below the surface, betrayal and abandonment, icy hatred between those we claim to call brother and sister. These bones clatter with all that is missing to bind them up together, echoing where the cartilage of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity,

faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control has simply worn away. But *can these bones live?*

We survey the cavernous spaces of our political lives, and they seem to be a wasteland of the worst of the human condition: rancor and corrosive division unlike any other era in human history, power and influence that shoves the needs of the most neglected to the side, innocent lives taken in schools and at borders, fear that dehumanizes and belittles those whom God calls beloved, all in service of partisan people trying to get their way. These bones rattle with rage and contempt, cracking and cleaving in every which way. But *can these bones live?*

And today we behold the literal and spiritual places of our church's life, and they can simultaneously feel like an arid desert of what has been or an uncharted wilderness of what is to come: buildings raised up and soon to be razed down, both for the glory of God; change that touches every corner and crevice of our landscape; familiar patterns encountering different ideas; longtime members welcoming new members. These bones pop and creak, yearning for a new rhythm to settle in. *But can these bones live?*

"I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live," promises the Lord to Ezekiel, breath that enlivens sinews and connects cartilage and covers arthritic, broken, and bleached bones with thick skin and blood and muscle and movement. "I will bind you up, my breath will bind you together, and that Holy Spirit will turn you loose," promises the Lord to those first disciples on that day of Pentecost. Those valleys of dry bones will soon leap to life, and where bones once clattered, tongues will chatter in languages thick with diversity but one in unity. Young and old, men and women, from all nations in

all time and places will receive this wild and holy Spirit. And the movement of the church will catch fire!

The promise of breath and spirit and life is clear. *Can these bones live?* God asks us. Well... can they?