

Can These Bones Live?
Ezekiel 37:1-14
August 19, 2007

The Reverend Corey Nelson
First Presbyterian Church Lake Forest
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Good morning, my name is Corey and I am new here, and I'm a little nervous. It would be a profound understatement to say that I am excited to be here with you not only in the beautiful sanctuary to worship God but more importantly among this community. A community about which I have heard so much and with whom I am so looking forward to working and serving along side for many years to come. I want to say thanks this morning especially to the members of the Associate Pastor Nominating Committee, and I want to let the rest of you know that if their commitment to this church; if their intellect and their spiritual depth; if their graciousness and hospitality towards me are any reflection of the rest of you in this congregation then I am truly blessed to be among you. I also have to say that I was rather impressed with the materials they had prepared upon my arrival, this snappy looking brochure; after reading through it I thought to myself, Wow, this guy looks pretty sharp, I can't wait to meet him.

I am humbled to be joining a congregation which for nearly 150 years has served as a beacon of light, a place of spiritual renewal and Christian service for this community on the north shore. Where for almost 60 years Presbyterian Women have been holding annual rummage sales, raising over \$3 million for mission; a congregation where deacons and elders and youth have continually poured together their time, resources and talents to serve as visible signs of Christ's love throughout this community and around the world. And, I am profoundly grateful to serve alongside colleagues in ministry. Colleagues who share not only my passion for mission and service but who understand that our call to service must always, always be grounded in a deep understanding of scripture and always be renewed by an investment in our spiritual journeys.

So with all of this in mind I began to wonder as I prepared for this morning about a particular text that might have something to say to us together about God's vision as we embark on God's mission together. As a congregation you have recently adopted a mission statement in which you want to proclaim God's vision for social justice. I have to say that is rather a bold move. Just between you and I, it would be a lot easier to just proclaim our own vision of social justice because we can just make stuff up. Instead you have decided to proclaim God's vision of social

justice, and so I began to pore through the scriptures wondering where we might find some insight and inspiration into exactly what God's vision is.

There's Matthew 25, that's a good place to start; it's the text where Jesus says, "even as you have done it unto the least of these, you've done it unto me." That's good stuff.

Or a couple chapters later in Matthew 28 we have Jesus' final words to his disciples before he ascends into heaven, "go therefore and teach all nations, preaching good news, baptizing in my name." That's great stuff...that would be a good place to start.

Or we can turn things on their head a little bit and turn to Luke's parable of the good Samaritan. With all of these options laid out on the table in front of me, I finally settled on one, the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel's bizarre vision of a valley of dry bones.

If any one of you had wondered about the collective wisdom of the APNC, my choice of this text this morning may now be giving you full blown anxiety that they've made a terrible mistake. But bear with me. Because I think there is something in this valley of bones for us this morning. There is something in this valley of bones that is true for us. So let us listen to the word of God for us today from Ezekiel 37: 1-14.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these 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. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived,

and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.’”

Will you pray with me? Gracious and loving God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Let all God’s children say, Amen.

“The hand of the Lord came upon me,” Ezekiel writes, “and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.”

Now, if you slept better than I did last night, and that seems likely, then perhaps you didn’t have, or at least don’t remember having, any bizarre dreams or visions. Hearing this text this morning, you may wonder what could this vision of dry bones possibly have to do with me, what might it mean? Then again, if you woke up this morning and turned on the news or picked up the local paper, you may have seen some valleys of dry bones. Coal miners of Utah and China have given their lives in difficult, dangerous work to provide energy for us. Sisters and brothers to our south in Jamaica and Cuba and Mexico who are preparing for the worst as hurricane Dean barrels down on them, waiting for their own valley of dry bones. Almost daily barrage of bombing in Iraq and Afghanistan taking the lives of civilians and our service men and women who are there on behalf of our country, valleys of dry bones. If the rumors are true, it sounds like Britney Spears is about to record a new album which is certainly going to be a valley of dry bones.

For the past fourteen years I have had the remarkable privilege of serving the Presbyterian Church in local and national and international mission. It has been an incredible journey that I had not expected, and one in which I had the privilege of serving along side sisters and brothers in Christ, our mission personnel and our

sisters and brothers in our partner churches around the world who work tirelessly and faithfully on behalf of the gospel of Jesus Christ, providing means of education and health care and churches and schools. Yet, at the same time as my eyes have been opened I have also come to understand that the very scope of the issues that we face today in our world of mission is ones which can be simply overwhelming.

Although the continent of Africa makes up only 10% of the world's population, they comprise 70% of all cases of HIV and AIDS, which is now the leading cause of death in Sub-Saharan Africa. Asia and the Pacific are now facing an even larger exponential growth in their own HIV/AIDS population. According to the U.N.A.I.D.S, the UN ministry that works on AIDS issues, 11 million more people are likely to contract HIV this year alone. In Haiti and the Dominican Republic, our neighbors to the south, we find 80% of all HIV/AIDS cases in the Caribbean. In the countries which are the poorest in the western hemisphere, therefore are the ones least able to provide for the treatment and prevention of HIV and AIDS.

But we don't have to travel beyond our borders. Although, in the United States medication and treatment and programs have begun to advance in recent years, there are still 40,000 new infections annually. The epidemic is shifting into minority communities. African-Americans, who constitute 13% of our populations, account for 54% of HIV/AIDS infections. HIV and AIDS in our world is a valley of dry bones.

In many parts of the world there is war and civil unrest. We are, of course, most familiar with the war in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in other parts of the Middle East including Israel and Palestine. One of the worst has gotten less attention, the war in the Sudan and central Africa. Sudan has suffered from the world's longest running civil war, 35 of the last 46 years, fueled by religious and cultural and ethnic differences between the countries northern and southern extremes. More than 2 million Sudanese, mostly in the south have died and 300 more die every day. More than 4.5 million people have been internally displaced as refugees, run out of their villages and their villages have either been burned down or filled with land mines. Sudan is quiet literally a valley of dry bones today.

Several of the ministries that are supported here by First Presbyterian Church, provide for the relief of hunger, homelessness and many of the symptoms of poverty; both here in this community, in Lake County and around the world. While this work has absolutely met critical needs, there are still 850 million people worldwide who go hungry every day, 6 million of them children under the age of 5.

In the United States, 36 million Americans, 13 million of which are children, live in households that experience hunger. If every one of these people were to line up at a food pantry in New York city, they would form a line that would stretch from New York to Los Angeles...twice. Poverty and hunger are valleys of dry bones.

These and many other valleys are just too overwhelming. They are too overwhelming to stay engaged in any meaningful way, and often times for us, for me, its easier just to shut off, to become disengaged because it is hard to hold on to hope in a world of so much hopelessness. I know we don't have to look outside of ourselves, in our lives from time to time; and for some of us in more times than others, we experience our own valleys of dry bones.

For those who work hard to keep family and work afloat, but feel that you are standing still on sinking sand. For those who work hard to keep love and justice alive and find that there are more enemies and more violence mushrooming everyday. For those who have given your lives to causes and programs and institutions that seem continually to run at full steam in the opposite direction of your efforts, these are valleys of dry bones.

If we are honest this morning, surely we have to admit that there are days when we cannot follow the Biblical admonition to give account of the hope that is within us. Some days that account just runs dry. There is no hope left and we are ready to declare spiritual bankruptcy. Despair and cynicism, anger and depression sneak up on us and knock on our door, demanding to be let in to the inner chambers of our heart. There are times when hope's door is not strong enough to keep them out. Sometimes we look at our lives or the world around us and all we see is a valley of dry bones.

The prophet Ezekiel looked out at the valley of dry bones and he saw the nation of Israel. Not the nation we see today, a proud country flying a shimmering white flag with a bright blue star of David. Instead, Ezekiel was looking out thousands of years ago at the nation of Israel, a nation which once lived under the glorious reigns of Kings Saul, David and Solomon, but now found itself to be a house divided. The southern kingdom had been invaded by the Babylonians and their elite, artisans, engineers, teachers, poets, had all been taken into exile. All that had been left behind in Israel had been the sick, poor and defeated. Ezekiel had been among those taken into exile and so, in his vision he sees this valley of dry bones in front of him. The bones, perhaps, of soldiers who had died in battle; the bones of people whose spirits were dead after losing their homelands. It seems there were not even survivors left to bury the dead. It is, for Ezekiel, a place of total

hopelessness of lifelessness. It is a place where the fallen had been forgotten, even by the scavengers. Ezekiel's nation, this once proud nation of Israel was simply now a valley of bones.

For Ezekiel, the vision was a vision of Israel's inability to stave off Babylon, to be sure, but more importantly, it was also a testament to failure. A testament to the forgotten, and the desolate places in our lives and the world around us that we wish did not exist.

This morning I wonder where is your valley of dry bones? Is it an old heart ache that won't go away? Is it the death of a loved one? Is it life's disappointments piling up? Is it that ache that reminds you that you have not quite found your place in life yet, your call, your connection to something larger than yourself? Where is your valley of dry bones? Maybe it sneaks up and surprises you from time to time. You wake up with that dry, sawdust, taste in your mouth and scratchy eyes and think to yourself, "this is going to be a dry bones day." It's not because things are that bad, but because things are not that good. Your life is like chicken at a fundraiser: dry and tasteless. Then you get up out of bed, turn on the news or read the paper: dry bones. You learn that a friend has cancer: dry bones. You've lost your job: dry bones. There's bad news from the doctor: dry bones. Dry bones, dry bones, dry bones.

Then, in the midst of this valley a very weird thing happens, God comes to us and says, "Mortal, can these bones live?" and we look around at the circumstances surrounding us and we want to shout back to God "NO, no they can't. They're bones, they're dead, they're finished, they're dried up. We should just bury them and go away."

"Mortal," God asks again, "can these bones live?"

The answer that Ezekiel gives, the only answer that we can give is, "O Lord God, you know."

This is stuff beyond our understanding, beyond our ability. This is the stuff of God. Can these bones live? Not by our power, not by our intellect or action, it is not within our reach.

"Mortal," God asks, "can these bones live?"

O Lord God, you know, only you know. The power of life belongs to you.

Here is why I picked this passage for today, because God says: prophesy to these bones and say to them: o dry bones, hear the word of our Lord....I will cause breath to enter you...my breath, my spirit, my ruah to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and flesh will come upon you and skin will cover you, and

I will put my breath into you and you shall live. And you shall know that I am the Lord your God.

Yes, the world is filled with valleys of dry bones. We have been to the valley ourselves, some of us have been there together. Sometimes we have walked right through the middle of it, even set up camp there. Today, as God is asking us, “can these bones live?” And we say, “God, you know.” God asks again, “Can these bones live?” Before waiting for a response, God says, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.” We, then, this morning are witnesses to God’s mighty work of putting flesh onto bones, of putting breath into these skeletons.

Mortal, can these bones live?

This morning, I believe that God is calling us as the church of Jesus Christ, to stand in faith and hope and to declare “Yes, yes these bones can live. Lord, with your breath these bones can live. God, these bones can come to life.” Why does the church keep pouring its little cup of water in the West Bank, in Sudan and other desperate places in the world so eagerly longing for hope? Why do we feed the hungry and house the homeless when there seems no end in sight? Why do we keep visiting shut-ins and those in the hospital when we have no miracle pill to take their pain away? Why do we commit ourselves to engage in the political processes of our time, when there is so much cynicism? Why? Because the breath of God is still blowing; that breath is still blowing in us, and through us. God is not done.

Let us take our stand this morning beside Ezekiel, let us take our stand and proclaim hope to the valley of dry bones. Thus says the Lord God: I will cause breath into you and you shall live. So let us arise from the hope that is within us, let us arise when we think that God has forgotten about our lives. Let us to rise when we have given up hope and have stopped dreaming. Let us arise when we think that God has forgotten about our sisters and brothers in the world around us, and stand beside Ezekiel. Let us arise because these bones can live again. Let us arise from the heaps of discarded dreams knowing that the spirit, the Holy Spirit is still breathing life into each and every one of us every day. Let us arise to live with God’s magnificent hope within us. Let us arise because the world lies in waiting, waiting for us to believe and to act knowing that God is not done. Our God is not done. Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah. Amen.