

Ezekiel 37:1-10; Acts 2:1-4

Ezekiel is an Old Testament prophet who receives visions from God. Probably his best-known vision is the one we read today about the Valley of Dry Bones. You remember... "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones... Now hear the Word of the Lord!"

Ezekiel witnessed the terrible siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in which Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C. He spent years in exile, along with other Jewish leaders, in what is now modern-day Iraq. There the hand of the Lord was upon him to proclaim hope in a time of hopelessness. Ezekiel 37 begins this way: *"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. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"*

It's funny when God asks a question of a human. 'Cause you know God knows the answer! But God is interested in Ezekiel's perspective. What does Ezekiel think of the situation? If I was asked "Mortal, can these bones live?" I likely would have said: "Not a chance! It's totally hopeless." When all you see around you is hopelessness it is hard to imagine hope. When all you see around you is death, it's difficult to imagine life.

There are all kinds of places and situations that feel hopeless. Haiti feels hopeless. The Middle East feels hopeless. Even if we can get a ceasefire, what then? You may have your own hopeless situations in your life. A hopeless relationship. A hopeless health condition. Take a moment to bring to mind something that feels hopeless to you

Our denomination, the United Church of Canada, is closing congregations at a huge rate. You would be hard pressed to find a community in the country that does not have a United Church, but so many are buildings without much in the way of life inside. Many look like churches but are really empty shells.

*"Mortal, can these bones live?"* Ezekiel answered, *"O Lord God, only you know."* That was a very wise answer. Ezekiel was in a close enough relationship with God that instead of being overwhelmed by the present circumstances he could see *God in the circumstances*. Instead of just staring at the desperate situation, Ezekiel turns his attention to God. Incredible things happen when you turn your face and your attention to God.

That's why it's so important to make a practice, a discipline of coming to worship, a practice/discipline of meditation, daily devotion, prayer, or some practice that draws you closer to God. Remember last week I pointed out that after Jesus ascended to heaven, the angels managed to get the disciples unstuck from their feelings of hopelessness after Jesus had left them. What did they do first? They prayed! Tradition has it they prayed for the 10 days from the Ascension until the day of Pentecost. I don't think that's a coincidence. When we turn our face to God and turn our attention to God, we experience the transforming power of God.

The Lord God tells the prophet Ezekiel to prophesy to the valley to "Hear the word of the Lord". As he prophesies—as he speaks to the dry bones — there's a rattling sound and the bones come together, and flesh comes on the bones until they are standing and looking like people again. But they are not alive. In the scripture the Hebrew word for *wind* and *breath* and *Spirit* are the same word. It's an onomatopoeia (it sounds like what it is): "*Ruah*". There is one crucial thing remaining: breath. Without breath there is no life. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind. "*Then he said to me, 'Prophecy 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.*"

On the day of Pentecost, as the disciples prayed, a sound "Like the rush of a violent wind" (sound familiar?) filled the room. The scripture says that tongues of fire appeared over them, and they were "filled with the Holy Spirit". Filled with the Holy Spirit on that day of Pentecost, Peter preached about daughters prophesying, young men seeing visions, and old men dreaming dreams. ***The Church was born not on what was, but what can be when the Breath of God fills the hearts of God's people with life.*** Can you imagine how different your life would be if it were not stuck on the pathetic present reality that surrounds you, but rather was anchored in the vision that God has for your life? Some situations in the world and in our own lives and in the church feel pretty hopeless. It's hard to be full of hope. But when we turn our attention to God, when we pray and seek God, the relationship changes us. I believe it gives us seeds of hope, and those seeds grow in amazing ways.



This church has been around for 196 years. It has been an incubator to many seeds of hope to ideas and dreams. The Rev. Rob Roy McGregor served here as an associate minister beginning in 1972.

shelter and tried to keep warm by opening the door of a little wood stove and tossing a log in now and then.



Newly ordained: the Rev. Rob Roy McGregor, June, 1940, Saskatoon, Sask. \*

By the time the sun rose, he was well on his

I remember him and his wife Delia, because though he retired in 1981, he continued to serve and make a difference as a minister Emeritus. In the late 70's he had read an article in *Guidepost* magazine about an organization in the U.S. called the Shepherd's Centre. It was a church-related group made up of seniors who helped other seniors. Bob chaired a steering committee and created Brockville's Shepherd Center. The organization became known as the Brockville Shepherd Welcome Center and now is called *The Brockville 50+*. It has a mandate "*to enhance the lives of Brockville and area residents 50 years old and over, by providing in a friendly and welcoming environment, affordable programs and activities that will keep them mentally and physically active.*"

The organization rents space and meets here in the church (along with other locations) and offers everything from Tai Chi and Majong to French and Harmonica (and keeps us hoping and fighting for parking spaces from Monday to Friday!) but it is no longer in any way affiliated with us as a 'church'. Nevertheless, it continues to make a huge difference to so many seniors in Brockville. Wall Street Village is another example, and so is Our Kenyan Kids. These are organizations that were dreamed and birthed and nurtured in this church and have grown beyond the walls of this church and are, or promise to be, a tremendous blessing to the community and the world.

Let me tell you about another dream:

One night—Palm Sunday night actually-- Jane Yaeger, a former member of this congregation who has since moved to another community, had a vivid dream. Jane is an artist, and in the dream, God told her she needed to get to work creating two banners. And in this same dream God told her the words that were to be put on the banners. There was a tremendous sense of urgency to the dream. Jane listened, and the next day she started shopping for materials. By 'coincidence' she was able to find everything she needed quickly and easily in Brockville. On Tuesday morning Jane came in to see my father, who was the Senior Minister here. She told him about the dream, and she told him that God wanted these banners to be unfurled the following Sunday, Easter morning! Now my father was a man who liked order and process, and messing with one of his services, especially Easter Sunday which had already been totally planned, would not have been immediately welcomed by him. However, he listened and discerned that this was indeed the hand of God at work, and so agreed. Now Jane didn't know *why* God wanted this done, she just knew that God did. Later

that afternoon the Rev. Bob MacGregor passed away. Jane and my father both saw the sign. The funeral service took place on Saturday, and afterwards the family was told that a memorial to him would be presented the following morning, Easter Sunday. During the service the banners were unfurled. They read ***De Profundus*** – ‘**Out of the Depths**’ of God’s power, mystery, and love, and ***Extra Muros*** – ‘**Beyond the Walls**’. The banners still hang above the choir loft today, and their message still guides us forward.

This year we have been doing a visioning process because we are aware of challenging realities: our demographic is aging and there are fewer volunteers and meeting budgets at a time when every cost is going up is challenging.

When we gathered in the fall and did a Values Exercise, one of our biggest values that rose to the surface was “Beyond the Walls.” Another was deep spirituality/faith. Those are the banners right there. I find that pretty amazing that a quarter of a century later this still feels like God’s call — a small seed that was planted in a hope-filled dream.

We need to make some changes so that God’s life and vision in this church might continue. Friends, even as we talk about what that change may be, we are called to give away life.

It is very important that we be aware of the current realities facing our church, the community and the world, but we must not get stuck there. We are called to deepen our faith and synch ourselves with God’s hopes and dreams.

We mark the day of Pentecost as the birthday of the Christian Church. That is the day the breath of God filled the people of God and turned ordinary people into a living church that has transformed individuals and nations by the power of the love of God.

We are called not to simply exist but to really *live* and give life to others. It’s funny that God brought Ezekiel to the Valley. It’s funny that God told the prophet Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind. The power and the life and the breath is God’s, but it was Ezekiel who flicked the switch and turned it on. This church has a history of doing things that make a lasting difference in the community and in the world. I feel I hear God saying *Wall Street Church, you haven’t seen anything yet!* Holy Spirit, breathe on your church. Fill your people with your Holy Spirit. Fill us with Your dreams, fill us with life and energy, that we may prophesy to the wind to bring God’s life and transforming power to hopeless places and people.

Amen