

April 2, 2017 (Journey worship)

TEXT: Ezekiel 37:1–14

TITLE: Only God Knows

By the Rev. Patrice Fowler-Searcy

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.'

I have heard this scripture passage preached many times over the course of my life. It was one of the choice pericopes at revival services in the Black church. Revivals, usually held annually in the fall and spring and would consist of five nights of powerful preaching, accompanied by exuberant and heart-felt singing, moving testimonies about the goodness of the Lord, and ecstatic, emotive and enthusiastic congregational response. The word "revival" stems from the Latin word, "revivere," meaning "to live again." Revivals were often called to revivify a dying or dead congregation, to lift and empower the spirits of the saints, and/or to re-enliven those who had grown complacent in their spiritual walk.

I can still recall the prayer so often evoked from the pastor of the host church during revivals, "Lord, send a revival from the pulpit to the pew. Stop by here Lord and enliven and revive your people with the power of the Holy Ghost!" I'm here to tell you that the

presence and power of the Holy Ghost, also known as the Holy Spirit, would be evident and exemplified as people clapped their hands, shouted or passed out overcome by the spirit, and danced and moved to rhythm of the music.

Revival services were something to behold. We looked forward to, cherished and celebrated them, especially if the guest preacher was charismatic or had a whoop. Ask me later, if you don't know what a whoop is. However, very often after the five nights of worship were over, six if the revival began on Sunday, I've often questioned, "Were our corporate or individual lives, our communities, our homes, or our places of worship revived, or changed in any significant way?"

One commentator states: "What kind of revival is it if the whoop overshadows the concrete help given to hurting communities in society?... Revivals must be more holistic than traditionally thought if the new life of God is ever to revitalize a dying economy, inadequately-resourced inner city schools, a hurting healthcare system, broken families, and neighborhoods ruled by violence." And I add: pervasive drug and substance addiction, abusive and violent relationships, racism, sexism, inequality, prejudice and nationalism run amok.

We may not have revivals as such in the Presbyterian denomination, but I submit to you that it's not enough for us to gather for worship each week, receive a powerful, correctly exegete sermon, read the word of God, sing songs of praise, pray until the Spirit of God falls and then leave without being moved to live differently or to make a difference in our communities. It's not enough for us to be spiritually or more appropriately "religiously" alive, but socially dead. Much like the dry bones Ezekiel encountered in the valley.

The hand of the Lord came upon Ezekiel and he was brought by the spirit of the Lord and set in the middle of the valley full of dry and desiccated bones. God led Ezekiel all around the bones and then asks him a peculiar question: "Can these bones live?" To which Ezekiel responds, "O Lord God, you know." And truly, only God knew whether the Israelites who were continually unfaithful to God would or could be revived and re-invigorated to life and faithfulness to the God of their salvation. Only the God, who created the world, freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, led them through the wilderness, kept them through periods of exile, restored and continually called them to life, even though they continually chose the way of death knew whether the dry bones in the valley could be called back to life. Only the God who had a plan from the beginning of time to reconcile a sinful people back into covenant relationship with God knew whether the dry bones in the valley could be revived and enlivened.

Only God knows whether we will chose light and enlightenment, in spite of everything that troubles and causes us anxiety and to put our proverbial heads in the sand and be drawn to darkness and ignorance. Only God knows whether we will stand for what is right and just or will fall victim to unfounded rhetoric, fear-mongering and nationalistic capitalism. Only God knows whether we will cherish and protect all of God's creation, humanity as well as the environment, or live and behave destructively. Only God knows whether the United States of America will be a nation that welcomes the tired, the poor,

the huddled masses yearning to breathe free or a nation that builds wall, imposes travel restrictions based on religion or institutes extreme vetting.

One commentator aptly stated: Ezekiel's "vision is held up today, when so many in the world have had their own experience of dry bones, literally and metaphorically. Our earth has been fashioned into massive graveyards of dry bones, transforming valleys into vales of desolation—from Darfur and the Congo and Zimbabwe to Myanmar and Pakistan and Iraq, from gang slayings and the drug wars to all those places lacking food or drink or clothing or shelter or any respect for life. People not only continue to pay a physical toll, but also a spiritual death that poverty, natural disasters and genocide exact, reducing people to a state of dry bones. Can these bones live?"

Who has not stood at some point in time at the gravesite of their hopes and dreams? Who has not been confronted by a situation in which any possibility of recovery seemed to be ruled out? At such times we appreciate the message of Ezekiel's vision. It speaks and reassures us of a God who can do and achieves the impossible. God can indeed bring to life, that which has died. Ezekiel's vision is a reminder for every generation that God gives and restores life, that death will never have the last word, even when all signs of life have been taken way; as was the case at Calvary, as Jesus' body hung lifelessly—God's divine eye was on the cross, where hopelessness birthed faith, where sadness birthed joy, where sorrow birthed gladness, where death birthed eternal life, where what appeared to be the final word birthed The Word.

Just as the Spirit of God moved across the abyss and the Word of God created the world out of chaos, and just as out of the dust of the earth God created and formed humanity, breathing life into our lifeless bodies; God, through the voice of the prophet and The Word, transforms the devastation of the dry and desolate places in our lives into new breathing, revived and living creations. Enabling us to move beyond Ezekiel's first impression as he looked upon the dry bones in the valley, as without life, a future, and hopeless, and instead see the possibilities through the eyes of God.

For in the end, brothers and sisters, only God interprets and declares what God will do among the people. And God is clear: everything will change, God alone is the change agent; we are God's work force: standing, marching, praying and demanding what is just and right in the eyes of God. However, only God can re-create, restore, and revive - the evidence is clear, as we cast our eyes beyond the chaos, confusion, disorder and growing turmoil and look to the cross.

Amen!