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Is New Life Possible

Ezekiel 37.1-14

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

How would you describe your feelings about a new year beginning? We find ourselves coping with uncertainty as we enter the pandemic's third year and that's only one thing causing stress and anxiety. We have experienced fear, illness, loss, and isolation. As a new year begins do you feel a sense of anticipation and promise, dread and fear, a bit of both? Would you say you're feeling hopeful or discouraged?

The prophet Ezekiel lived in a time and place that could make anyone feel hopeless and discouraged. Ezekiel was a prophet who lived in Judah, the Southern Kingdom of Israel, about six centuries before the birth of Christ. In 597 or 598 BC, before the fall of Jerusalem, he was taken captive to Babylon along with King Jehoiachin. Ezekiel had a tough life. Not only was he taken from his homeland, but he watched his wife die. He could empathize with people who endured pain and loss. He was given the tough task of preaching to God's people in exile in Babylon and much of his message was bleak. He had to tell the people why they had been taken captive – because they'd persistently turned away from God to worship idols and had willingly engaged in terrible practices that came with idol worship, like child sacrifice and the exploitation and abuse of vulnerable people. Ezekiel called God's people to repent—to turn back from their idolatrous pursuits to the living God, so that God could restore them. Eventually, the Lord gives Ezekiel a vision and the call to speak words of hope to people in a seemingly hopeless situation that God will give them new life.

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**. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, **and they were very dry**. 3 He said to me, "***Mortal, can these bones live?***" I answered, "***O Lord God, you know.***" 4 Then he said to me, "***Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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.**"

7 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. 8 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. 9 Then he said to me, "*Prophecy to **the breath**, prophecy, 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.**"* 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and **the breath came into them**, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 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.'***" 12 *Therefore prophecy, 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.* 13 *And **you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.*** 14 ***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."

Hope is one of life's necessities. A friend of mine liked to say, "A person can live for three days without food, three minutes without oxygen, but only three seconds without hope." There are many circumstances that can cause a person to lose hope. Hope can be squeezed out of us by the impact of events such as an illness or disease, a tornado or hurricane, or a war that destroys one's home and possessions, eliminates the opportunity to work at one's job, undermines one's faith and results in the death of family and friends. The last example is the condition of the people to whom the Prophet Ezekiel is speaking in Ezekiel 37. Their nation had been conquered, everything lay in ruins - the capital city Jerusalem, the beautiful temple that Solomon had built which was the center of their faith, and many towns. Thousands were dead. The whole social fabric of the nation was torn to shreds. People had lost hope.

In the aftermath of that situation, God gives Ezekiel a vision of restoration and rebirth that's only possible by the moving of God's Spirit in and through the people. In Hebrew, the word "*ruah*" means "*spirit, breath, and wind*" so there's a constant word play in Ezekiel 37:1-14 that emphasizes God breathing hope into a situation where all hope seems lost. These words are very appropriate for us today.

Last week Greg spoke about Lamentations and waiting on the Lord and it's interesting to note that **the Hebrew word that is most frequently translated as waiting is also translated as two other words, "Hope" and "Trust."** Hope is as intermingled with Waiting and Trusting as flour, sugar, and butter are in cookies. You can't separate them once the cookies are made. **Hoping, waiting, and trusting are all ingredients of faith.** Painful events that happen to us, whether they're totally beyond our control or ones we bring on ourselves as was the case for the people of Ezekiel's time, can become the means by which our relationship with God deepens and grows because they can force us to wait, trust, and hope in the Lord.

Recently I read *The Book of Hope: A Survival Guide for Trying Times* by Jane Goodall and Douglas Abrams with Gail Hudson. Jane Goodall says (page 8), "**Hope is what enables us to keep going in the face of adversity. It is what we desire to happen, but we must be prepared to work hard to make it so.**" Hope is not wishful thinking. "*Real hope requires action and engagement.*" Goodall states, "*Looking at the headlines- the worsening climate crisis, a global pandemic, loss of biodiversity, political upheaval,*" it can be hard to be hopeful. Yet hope has never been more desperately needed. Without hope, all is lost. **Hope is a crucial survival trait** that has sustained people for thousands of years.

In Ezekiel 37 God asks Ezekiel, "*Can these bones live?*" This is a question about hope. The dry bones represent the hopeless people of God who had been conquered by the Babylonians. Can these bones live is a way of saying, "*Is there any hope?*" One of the worst things you can say to a person is that he or she is "hopeless." In Charles Dickens's classic, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge laments to the final Spirit who reveals his impending, unmourned death, "**Why show me these things if I am past all hope?**"

Like Jane Goodall's book, the Bible is also a Book of Hope and a Survival Guide for Trying Times. The Bible reminds us that we're not the first people to live in and through trying times. The Bible is a journey toward hope. **Hope doesn't deny evil, it's a response to it.** Ezekiel says the people of Israel had given up hope. Their cry, "*Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off completely,*" is the plaintive lament of a hopeless people. But God promises to bring them back to their own land and to restore to life what seemed dead and hopeless. How is this possible given their terrible circumstances? The Lord says, "***I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live.***" God's promise of renewal through the power of the Spirit is a gift to God's people. Those bones do live, the exiles return to Jerusalem, and as we heard earlier this year from Nehemiah and Ezra, **they build a new temple, they rebuild their lives, their community of faith and hope is reborn.**

We just celebrated Christmas 8 days ago. Christmas is about **the gift of hope** in the midst of our weary, strife-filled world. Christmas is about the hope that life can be different, that God can do things we don't anticipate, that God can break into our lives with good news. God can even make dry bones come together and fill them with Spirit-filled breath and life. Christmas is about being embraced by and holding onto the hope we have in Christ. It's about the hope that is represented in the baby born to Mary so many years ago who can be born in us today and give us new life.

A church was preparing for Christmas services and the pastor decided he wanted a banner made for the entryway and had a church member call the banner company. The church member told the man on the phone the message he wanted, and the dimensions needed. The sign came back a few days later: "***Unto Mary Jesus was born, six feet long and two feet wide.***"

Jesus wasn't born quite that big, but if he lives in us, he's big enough to give us hope and help. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, and we rededicate ourselves to allowing Christ to be born in us and to live and grow within us. You are to be the presence of Christ in the world today. It's far better to hope, wait, and trust in the Lord than in anyone or anything else because everything else can disappear or change in a moment.

We see the blessing of hoping in the Lord when Jesus grows up and begins his ministry. Time after time, he brings hope when hope is gone, he makes new life possible. In **Mark 5.21-43**. The little daughter of a man named Jairus, one of the leaders of the local synagogue, was at the point of death. Jesus goes to the home and the people there say, “the girl is dead.” Jesus says (Mark 5.39-40), “*The child is not dead, but sleeping.*” **and they laughed at him.** He says to her, “Little girl, get up!” And immediately she got up. **Can these bones live? Yes!**

I mentioned last month the story of the widow whose only child died in **Luke 7.11-17**. Jesus says to him as he’s being carried out for burial, “**Young man, I say to you, rise!**” **Can these bones live? Yes!**

Perhaps the best-known story like this is of Lazarus in John 11.41-44. Lazarus was a friend of Jesus and he’d already been dead for four days so it’s a bigger miracle. “So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, “*Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.*” When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, “**Lazarus, come out!**” The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, “**Take off the grave clothes and let him go.**” **Can these bones live? Yes!**

Then there’s the resurrection of Jesus himself. They think he’s dead and buried, he’s not! The angel says, (Luke 24.5), “*Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.*” **Can these bones live? Yes!**

The Book of Revelation was written to **give hope** to those living in a time of persecution. There’s a verse that sounds similar to Ezekiel 37.3 which is (to refresh your memory), “He said to me, “**Mortal, can these bones live?**” I answered, “**O Lord God, you know.**” In Revelation 7.13-17, we read, Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “*Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?*” 14 I said to him, “**Sir, you are the one that knows.**” Then he said to me, “These are they **who have come out of the great ordeal**; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.15 For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne

will shelter them.¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;¹⁷ for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Even out of seemingly hopeless situations of persecution and injustice, new life is possible, hope is possible, even beyond your death. A person I had tremendous respect for died this past week. **Bishop Desmond Tutu** of South Africa was a man whose faith, courage, and joyful spirit helped bring significant change to South Africa and the world. Jill and I were blessed to hear him preach in person at Westminster Abbey in London in 1987. He said, ***“Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”***

When you’re feeling hopeless, remember, the God who can turn coal into diamonds, sand into pearls, and a worm into a butterfly, can turn your life around too. Brother Lawrence (1614-1691) said, *“Many things are possible for the person who has **hope**. Even more is possible for the person who has **faith**. And still more is possible for the person who knows how to **love**. **But everything is possible for the person who practices all three virtues.”***

Prayer: God of this new year, we are walking into mystery. We face the future, not knowing what the days and months will bring to us or how we will respond. Grow love in us as we journey. May we welcome all who come our way. Deepen our faith to see all of life through your eyes. Fill us with hope and an abiding trust that you dwell in us amidst our joys and sorrows. Thank you for the treasure of our faith life. Thank you for the gift of being able to rise each day with the assurance of your walking through the day with us. God of this new year, we praise you. Amen.

Blessing: Psalm 33:18-22 (NIV), “The eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those **who hope in his unfailing love**, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. **We wait in hope for the Lord**; he is our help and shield. In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. May your unfailing love be with us, Lord, **even as we put our hope in you.**”

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How do you think Ezekiel felt about his assignment in Ezekiel 37? What types of tasks or challenges are you currently facing that seem the most daunting or impossible to you?
2. In Ezekiel 37.5-6, God is telling Ezekiel to preach to heaps of human bones which seems difficult. Has God ever asked you to do something ridiculous or impossible? Describe what happened.
3. Do you have a personal circumstance so daunting that you have lost hope? How does Ezekiel 37.1-14 help when you've lost hope?
4. Discuss or reflect on Jane Goodall's description of hope, "*Hope is what enables us to keep going in the face of adversity. It is what we desire to happen, but we must be prepared to work hard to make it so.*"
5. What is the difference between hope and wishful thinking? Why is hope a crucial survival trait?
6. What is the role of faith, God's Word, and God's Spirit in giving you hope?