

### *Covenant of Life*

The Lord's power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord's spirit, he led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. He led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry. He asked me, "Human one, can these bones live again?" I said, "Lord God, only you know." He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord." I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them. He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, human one! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live." I prophesied just as he commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. He said to me, "Human one, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.' So now, prophesy and say to them, The Lord God proclaims: I'm opening your graves! I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land. You will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, my people. I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says."

Ezek. 37:1-14 (C.E.B.)

I just love the image Ezekiel paints for us, don't you? It's an image that has captured the imagination of artists and songwriters and Sunday School children ever since it was first written while Israel was in exile.

And it starts with an image describing the emotional experience of the exile. And in many ways it's one we have all experienced. We have seen the valley of dry bones Ezekiel is describing. If we haven't seen it with our own eyes, we have seen it through the eyes of others. And some of us are currently in the middle of that valley.

Maybe it describes where many KU fans found themselves after their dramatic loss last weekend. 😊 Probably more devastating than K-State's loss last night though. They went further than expected. No one could have predicted either outcome.

More seriously, we've all experienced the death of dreams. It may not have ranked with the grief experienced by the Israelites in Exile or the disciples while Jesus was in the tomb, but it has been just as real. We've had our hopes dismantled. We've wept in grief over one loss or another. And each valley of dry bones is as different as we are.

Some of our valleys are easier to imagine than others. I can only begin to imagine what it is like for a family living in Ukraine, for example. All they can see are the signs of destruction all around. What was once a beautiful and growing and thriving country has been turned to rubble by the violence of war. Any dreams for the future are now narrowly defined by the struggle for survival. Every evidence of their past prosperity has been obliterated.

They live in a valley not much different from the one Ezekiel sees.

Or think of the devastation created by earthquakes and shoddy construction in Turkey and Syria. It's an unbelievable story of loss. Or the refugees who have left their homes as a result of violence or persecution or famine.

Closer to home, I try to imagine what is like for those families whose loved ones have died while in police custody. Or the parents whose children die in school shootings. And each new report makes the stories all the more bleak.

It is a dark valley where the survivors live.

But there's also the family facing bankruptcy after investing enormous amounts of time, energy, and finances in creating a business. They took out loans to finance their dreams. They willingly and knowingly sacrificed family for the sake of their future success.

It was a lifelong dream. Both the husband and the wife had been involved in related businesses; they had a sense of what would work and what wouldn't work. And when the opportunity came, they took a chance. They found a site for their business. They began to seek clients and customers. They spent almost every waking moment involved in some aspect of this business adventure.

But it failed miserably.

They, too, have been to the valley of dry bones. They've lived there.

Can these bones live? Can new life be found here, in this valley?

When Ezekiel is taken to the valley of dry bones, he is led all around the valley. He sees that the bones are dead. They have been bleached by the sun. There is no flesh on them. There is no life in them (Ezek. 37:2).

And then God asks the question, "Can these bones live" (Ezek. 37:3*a*)?

It isn't a trick question, though it may seem like one. The answer is simply "If you want them to, they can" (Ezek. 37:3*b*). God can bring life to anything, to anyone, to any circumstance. It's what Jesus means on his entry into Jerusalem when he says, "tell you, if [the people] were silent, the stones would shout" (Lk. 19:40). God can bring life to rocks or bones or dust. It's what God does, in fact. It's at the heart of the Covenant of Life.

The good news is God envisions a new future in the Covenant of Life, where the bones come together and live again, this time in community with one another, supporting one another in fostering life all around.

If we read further in this chapter, that becomes even more clear.

They will be my people, and I will be their God. My servant David will be king over them. There will be just one shepherd for all of them. They will follow my case laws and carefully observe my regulations. They will live on the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where their ancestors lived. They will live on it, they and their children and their grandchildren, forever. My servant David will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace for them. It will be their covenant forever. I will grant it to them and allow them to increase. I will set my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling will be with them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. The nations will know that I, the Lord, make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.

Ezek. 37:23*c*-28 (C.E.B.)

“My dwelling place will be with them; and I will be their God” (Ezek. 37:27). Those are the words on our Covenant stone. “My dwelling place will be with them; and I will be their God.” The rest of the passage mentions or alludes to each of the previous covenants we’ve explored during Lent this year. The Covenant of Provision, the Covenant of Land, the Covenant of Sustenance, and the Covenant of Leadership. And it reminds us that when we live in community, we experience peace, true peace. In fact, I wondered if it should be called the Covenant of Peace rather than the Covenant of Life (Ezek. 37:26).

I’m not sure how many of you have noticed it before. Unless you’re looking for it – or come into our parking lot after dark – you may not see it. We have had a candle in the window on the south side of the sanctuary every day, all day, all night, ever since the invasion of Iraq in 2003.

For twenty years now, it has served as a reminder to us, and a witness to our neighbors, that we believe God’s desire is for peace. It’s part of the Covenant of Life, a covenant in which God grants us life and we are asked to live in community with one another, caring for and about each other. It’s about helping others find hope in hopeless situations so that life can be renewed, restored.

For many years, one of my favorite comic strips was Calvin and Hobbes. Unfortunately, it’s no longer in print. Calvin and Hobbes is based on a 9 or 10-year-old boy named Calvin and his stuffed tiger named Hobbes. Calvin has a vivid imagination and is always full of mischief; but the curious part of the script is Hobbes. Hobbes is a normal stuffed tiger, just like any child might have, except for one detail: when no one else is around, Hobbes comes to life. He interacts with Calvin and wrestles with Calvin. And generally, when Calvin gets into trouble, it’s because of something that Hobbes has done. But no one else ever witnesses Hobbes in action. To everyone else, it’s all in Calvin’s imagination.

Calvin gives life to the character of Hobbes; no one else is capable of doing that. Hobbes only has life within the context of that relationship. Life, for Hobbes, is defined by and granted by Calvin.

Now, it’s easy to dismiss Hobbes as a figment of Calvin’s imagination except that every reader of the comic has also witnessed this life. In that sense, we, too, give life to Hobbes.

In Ezekiel’s vision, the bones come to life. And we have seen that, too. We have seen that coming out of a pandemic, if nothing else. We know that life can and does come to these bones, and not just in the vision. Sometimes, though, it feels as if we’re just going through the motions of life; we’re still in the valley of dry bones, but we don’t know it.

Life is more than just moving around. Life is more than going through the motions. Life is more than the “rattling bones” in the valley. Life is more than shape and form.

In both Hebrew and Greek, the words for breath are the same as the words for wind and spirit. There is the constant word play that leaves it up to the reader to decide which is the appropriate meaning in any particular phrase. We rely on translators to do that for us unless we begin to recognize the subtle nuances of the text.

The bones in Ezekiel’s vision come to life after he preaches to the wind – to the Spirit, to the breath – and it breathes into – or blows into or inspires – the now connected bones (Ezek. 37:9). In English the closest phrase I could come up with to describe this word play is that these expired people have become inspired people. They are given life by the breath of God – by the Spirit of God.

Let me try to explain it another way. If I were to take some soap and breathe into it, the soap takes a new shape. It doesn’t even look the same. The soap becomes bubbles that float in the air. They are filled with my breath.

(actually make some bubbles)

That doesn't make them living things, but the bubbles no longer have the same appearance. These bubbles have a new shape and form. They tend to bring joy and smiles and a sense of hope because of the breath, because of the wind in them – and by the spirit we sense in our presence. It's more than form that gives life, it's also the spirit.

In the story of Pinocchio, we learn the same thing. In that story, a wood carver makes a string puppet. It's the dream of the wood carver to have a little boy of his own, so he begins to wish Pinocchio to life.

The puppet can act like a boy. But he's made of wood. There's no life in him because he has no spirit, no breath. He can only go through the motions of life, not the Covenant of Life.

Breath is eventually given to him, not by God, but by the fairy in the story. The fairy gives him life in the same way Calvin gives life to Hobbes. The bubbles have life only when we breathe into them.

But when the bones Ezekiel sees come to life, it's because of the breath of God. God grants life. God is the source of all life. It is the Covenant of Life. God breathes into us and gives us life, sometimes new life.

“Can these bones live?”

- Can we find life in the valleys of our lives?
- Can there be life in Ukraine?
- Can there be life after divorce or after bankruptcy?
- Can there be life in the midst of lawsuits and accusations?
- Can there be life during final exams at school?
- Can there be life after the death of a child or a spouse?
- Can there be life after dreams have been shattered?

Ezekiel's vision says yes. God can create life out of any circumstance. It's what God does.

But it isn't up to the bones. It isn't up to Hobbes. It isn't up to Pinocchio. It isn't up to us, either. The source of life is the creator of life, and Ezekiel depicts this life as a gift of grace. These bones are brought to life by the will of God so they will know to whom they belong (Ezek. 37:13-14). It is given with the understanding that they will become a new community, a community of peace.

I believe that when we trust God with all of life we begin to find breath and spirit and wind – even in the stillness of the valley. It's in “the valley of the shadow of death” that we find life, for we begin to understand more fully the true source of life.

God brings hope only when we learn to trust in God as the source of life, no matter what our circumstances may be.

Can these bones live? Absolutely!

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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