

# New Spirit

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**Sermon Series: The God Who Makes All Things New**

Ezekiel 37:1-10

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When I think of skeletons, my mind reverts back to ninth grade science class. When we studied human anatomy, our science teacher lectured, utilizing an actual, full-length human skeleton. This skeleton was mounted in a standing position. The apparatus that held the skeleton in place resembled a portable IV unit. Those of you who have spent time at hospitals know of what I speak. When a hospital patient wants to walk the hospital floor with an IV bag, the bag is attached to a metal pole on wheels.

This mobile skeleton was shuttled back and forth between science classes by means of such a portable unit. Occasionally, I would see our science teacher wheeling this skeleton to class. It was a rather curious sight to see my teacher pushing a skeleton through the halls.

This skeleton was given a name which escapes me now. I didn't relish the thought of being on a first-name basis with a skeleton.

We would study human anatomy by examining this skeleton. When we switched to other subjects, the skeleton stood impassively in the corner. I found its steely gaze most disconcerting.

This skeleton comes to mind when I read Ezekiel's valley-of-dry-bones vision. The Lord leads

the prophet Ezekiel to a valley full of skeletal remains.

Artistic depictions of this Bible story are rather spooky. Little wonder we don't display artwork of this valley of dry bones in children's picture Bibles or post it on Sunday School classroom walls.

Ezekiel makes a point of telling us these bones are very dry (37:2). This valley is littered with human skeletons, dried out and bleached by exposure to the sun. In other words, these people are dead, dead, dead. They're as dead as the skeletal remains displayed in the Hall of Bones at the Smithsonian's Natural History building.

The Lord asks Ezekiel, "Son of Man, can these bones live?" (37:3). The obvious answer is, No, of course not. They're just bones. Bones can't live. Ezekiel knows better than to say this out loud to the Lord, so he responds with an evasive, albeit correct answer: "You alone know, Sovereign Lord." You tell me.

The Lord directs Ezekiel to prophesy or preach to these bones. Imagine, preaching to the bones at Arlington Cemetery, "Dry bones; hear the word of the Lord" (37:6).

Ezekiel does as he is told and preaches to the bones. His sermon literally creates quite a stir. Suddenly, the bones begin to rattle and, bone-on-bone, come together. Before long, a whole valley full of

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bodies stands before Ezekiel in neat rows, listening politely and showing no signs whatsoever of any life. In short, my friends, Ezekiel has a valley full of Presbyterians!

Every time I reach Ezekiel's vision, I am reminded of the African-American spiritual, "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones." The song follows the progression of bones coming together: the foot bone connects to the leg bone, the leg bone connects to the knee bone, the knee bone connects to the thigh bone, the thigh bone connects to the hip bone, the hip bone connects to the back bone, the back bone connects to the shoulder bone, the shoulder bone connects to the head bone... Don't you hear the Word of the Lord."

The Lord directs Ezekiel a second time to keep preaching. "Say to the breath, 'Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live'" (37:9). There is a play on words in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew word for breath, *ruach*, is the same word translated as wind or spirit. This Hebrew word appears a total of ten times within a span of 14 verses. Indeed, you can't pronounce this Hebrew word, *ruach*, without using your breath. The Holy Spirit is God's breath or wind. Our text serves to retell the creation story. This same Spirit was active in creation, breathing life into Adam and Eve (Genesis 2:7).

Presbyterians often give this third member of the Trinity second class treatment. God the Father

speaks of God's creative power, God the Son is made flesh in Jesus Christ, but what about God the Spirit? Think of the Holy Spirit as God's breath, breathing life into people.

Ezekiel again does as he is told and the result is, well, breathtaking. As Ezekiel preaches to the breath, God breathes life into these dry bones. Before long, these living creatures stand before Ezekiel as a vast army (37:10).

What is the point of Ezekiel's two-step preaching assignment? What is the purpose of preaching, first to the bones in verse 6 and second to the breath in verse 9?

Ezekiel must do his part in revival; he must preach the word. But the Word lacks force and power without the Spirit. The Spirit gives life to the Word.

Ezekiel cannot pull off revival by his own efforts alone. God breathes life into people. Spiritual revival cannot be manipulated or coerced. The Spirit refuses to be domesticated. The Spirit is not ours in some possessive sense. Renewal is God's work.

This year, 2007, is a time of renewal for our church. But whom are we kidding? We cannot decree 2007 to be a year of renewal by human fiat alone.

We must do our part, just as Ezekiel did his part. We prepare our hearts for God's work of renewal. But only God can bring renewal.

Last Sunday, I mentioned that I've been reading revival sermons of late. I said that I've been disappointed with revival sermons from the last two centuries, so I went further

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- Arthur Moore

back to read sermons from the First Great Awakening in the 1700s and the Second Great Awakening in the 1800s. I find these older sermons to be superior to modern versions. They speak the unvarnished truth. Their analysis of the human condition is deep and penetrating.

Ezekiel 37 is one of the best revival sermons ever preached. Ezekiel has the unenviable task of preaching to a valley of dry bones. Talk about preaching to a dead congregation!

One 19th century preacher, Charles Spurgeon, often preached during seasons of revival 10 to 12 times a week. There were many nights of revival when the people would be so earnest that they would keep a preacher busy from six o'clock in the evening until two in the morning. The people would remark, “Our minister will kill himself.”

“Not me,” said Spurgeon, “that is the kind of work that will kill no man. It is preaching to a sleepy congregation that kills good ministers, but not preaching to earnest people.”

Nothing will kill this or any other preacher faster than preaching to people who are dead to the things of God. I am reminded of the quote attributed to Methodist bishop Arthur Moore: “It is easier to tame a fanatic than raise a corpse.” I’ll take revival over lethargy any day.

St. Augustine wrote these memorable words:

“Give me a man that loves. He experiences what I speak. Give me one that yearns, one that hungers, one that is traveling in the wilderness and thirsts and pants for the springs of his eternal home; give me such a person and he knows what I speak. But if I speak to the cold man, he will never understand.” Help us to know our need, O Lord, and not be the “cold one.”

Ezekiel’s vision is directed to people who have lost their hope, in verses 11-14. In 597 BC, the new world superpower Babylonia ransacked the holy city of Jerusalem, reduced the temple, the sign of God’s presence, to rubble and deported its citizens. God’s people cry out, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (37:12). Our bones are dry—bone dry.

Psalm 137 expresses the despairing mood of exile:

“By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:1-40).

They were as good as dead. But where God is concerned, dead is good. Thus says the Lord, “I will open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and

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I will bring you back to the land of Israel...I will put my spirit within you and you shall live” (37:12-14). Though good as dead, God’s people will be revived.

You may feel like God’s people in exile. Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost. You may have given up hope long ago. You may think your best years are behind you. You may feel as though God has forsaken you.

“Can these bones live? O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

Preach to the bones and say, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.”

Preach to the wind. “Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these bones, that they may live.” As I preached, breath came into them and they stood on their feet, a vast army.

I like the way a Southern preacher by the name of Vance Havner said it: Snowflakes are frail, but if enough of them get together, they can stop traffic.”

So, in the spirit of Ezekiel, let it snow!

“Will you not revive us again, O Lord?” (Psalm 85:6) Revive your people. Revive your church.

“Can these bones live?”

***“Will you not revive us again, O Lord?”***

- Psalm 85:6