

OUR PILGRIMAGE OF FAITH: THE BREATH OF LIFE
Ezekiel 37:1-14

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville
March 9, 2008*

Imagine with me that you are living in the year 585 B.C.E. You are living in Babylon, but you are not Babylonians. You are Jews who were taken forcibly from your native city of Jerusalem a year ago to live in exile in Babylon. You have lost the land God gave to your ancestors. You have lost your beloved city of Jerusalem, which has been destroyed by the Babylonian army. And you have lost your place of worship, the magnificent temple of Solomon, which lies in ruins.

In Babylon you have no temple in which to worship, and you have lost many of the members of your faith community. You wonder whether God has totally deserted you. You feel completely cut off from the land of the living, like the dead remains of what was once a living, vibrant people. You feel like dry bones lying in a valley of dry bones, dead in exile. All hope is gone.

And then Ezekiel, a Jewish priest in exile with you, tells you about a vision he has had, a vision of dry bones in a valley of dry bones. In this vision God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live? Can these dead bones ever come to life again? Can this people of mine live?"

And Ezekiel answers, "You alone, O God, know the answer to that question." And the answer that comes back from God is a resounding "Yes! Yes, these bones can live. Yes, my people will live again. I will put my spirit within them, and breathe into them the breath of life, and they shall live."

And then in Ezekiel's vision, as he relates it to you, God promises not only to bring new life to your dry bones, but also to bring you back to the city of Jerusalem and allow you to rebuild the temple. That vision gives you hope and the assurance that God is with you in your exile. If you could look ahead 50 years, you could see that God fulfills all those promises.

I now invite you to return to 2008, and to think with me about what this vision could possibly mean for us in our day. Now this vision could be interpreted on several different levels. For example, we could relate it to our personal lives, or to our lives as citizens of Erie County, or to our national life as American citizens, or to what's going on at the national level in our denomination. All of these would be valid ways of connecting this vision to us in our day.

However, I suggest that this morning we focus on this congregation. What might this vision mean for you as members and friends of North Church? Is there any way in which you as a congregation were living in a kind of exile at any time in recent years? Is there any way in which your church could have been described as being like dry bones in a valley of dry bones? As we ponder those questions, consider with me some of your recent past.

Thirteen years ago you as a congregation struggled with major conflict between your co-pastors and also between one of your co-pastors and some members of the congregation. That conflict could have split the church, and in fact some people did leave and never returned. From all accounts it was not a pleasant time in your history. For those of you who were here then, did it ever feel like you had lost your sense of community and were on the verge of losing your church? When all of your energy was consumed in trying to resolve the conflict, did it ever feel like this church had become dry bones lying in a valley of dry bones, cut off from the land of the living? Did you ever wonder whether you could survive as a congregation? Did you ever wonder whether God had deserted you?

Fast forward ten years to the time when Tom Evans left. Some of you were very attached to him, and you had hoped---indeed, you had assumed---that he would stay a long time. But after only five and a half years he left, leaving you wondering what had happened. Was there something wrong with this church? Or did he simply find that he was better suited for presbytery ministry rather than parish ministry? Or was it a combination of factors? Whatever the cause of his leaving, it may have made some of you feel that you were in a kind of exile. Did it ever feel like this church had suddenly become dry bones in a valley of dry bones?

And then I came to be your pastor during your interim period. Interim times are often described as wilderness times, as desert times, even as times of exile. Congregations often wonder whether people will drift away, or whether the energy and vitality of the church will evaporate when there is no permanent pastor on the scene. Moreover, since the interim time is a time to reflect on the church's history and to acknowledge honestly the conflicts of the past, it is sometimes a painful time of introspection and self-awareness. It is also a time to try to fix anything that is broken in the life of the church, so it is not an easy time for congregations. During the last two and a half years, have you ever felt that you as a congregation were living in a time of exile? Have you ever felt like dry bones lying in a valley of dry bones? Have you ever wondered whether these bones would ever live again?

When Ezekiel was asked this last question, he was surrounded by a people who were discouraged by the ravages of loss, and who had no reason for hope. It would have been easy for Ezekiel to answer God's question by saying, "No, these bones can't live. We are a bunch of dried-up bones with no life left in us, and we have no hope of getting out of our exile, so we might as well give up."

But that's not what Ezekiel said. Ezekiel responded by acknowledging that God is the source of life and that God can bring life even to dry bones.

Now it would have been easy also for you to give up in the face of what might have seemed like a hopeless situation in the midst of conflict, or when your pastor left abruptly, or during this interim period. But like Ezekiel, you did not do that. Instead, you prayed that God would lead you out of your exile, and that God would put flesh on your bones and breathe life into your body, so that this people of God could live.

And I believe that God has answered your prayers with a resounding "*Yes! Yes, these bones can live! Yes, I will breathe my spirit into them, and they shall live.*" In the time I have been here, I have seen many indications that God is breathing new life into these bones of

yours.

For example, after years of being afraid to talk about the conflicts of the past and about controversial issues such as homosexuality, you have opened up considerably and have begun to talk about those things that once were forbidden subjects. You have learned that you can talk about tough issues in mutually respectful dialogue and that you can agree to disagree in love. Those are very good signs! Can these bones live? *Yes, these bones can live!* (Say it with me: *Yes, these bones can live!*)

The Life-Long Learning program here has grown and flourished during the past two years, with many adults attending classes on topics such as “Unity in Diversity,” “Science and Religion,” “Saving Jesus,” and “The Thoughtful Christian.” You flocked in large numbers to hear Jack Rogers speak about two of his books, and to hear Tony and Peggy Campolo dialogue about homosexuality, a gathering that one of you said could never have happened here ten years ago. We began a new program a year and a half ago---Sunday Night at the Movies---which has been very successful. And the Tuesday Night Lenten Soup Suppers have received rave reviews. Can these bones live? *Yes, these bones can live!*

The adult choir, long an important part of the 10:45 service, has recently grown to over 25 people. Next week they will be doing a cantata for both services. The bell choir also continues to grow, both in the number of bells and the number of ringers. And the Sacred Dance Choir and the Drama Group continue to energize and enliven our worship services. And who can forget the Children’s Christmas Pageant? Can these bones live? *Yes, these bones can live!*

The Mission Committee has continued this church’s long-standing commitment to mission. Twenty people from North Church went on the Katrina mission trip to New Orleans. As a fund-raiser for the Katrina project, Westminster Hall was jumping last month with dancing and singing and silly hats and Mardi Gras beads and, of course, chocolate. And next week you will give generously, as you always do, to the One Great Hour of Sharing. Mission is the primary reason for the church’s existence, and North Church is passionate about mission. Can these bones live? *Yes, these bones can live!*

If you haven’t seen North Church’s web page recently, I encourage you to look at it when you get home. The transformation between what used to be and what is is amazing! Through the hard work, commitment of time, and technical know-how of the CyberMinistry Team---Jim McConnell, Brad Hahn, Kristi Rugg, Kathy Lash, Ann Eisenlord, and Linda Donner---the dry bones of the past have been revitalized, and new life has been breathed into North Church’s web site. Can these bones live? *Yes, these bones can live!*

Sometime after Tom Evans and Liz Walker came, your Stephen Ministry program died; and that once-vibrant ministry became dry bones in a valley of dry bones. Two years ago, when Mary Lou George was hired as Director of Pastoral Care, a primary part of her job description was to breathe new life into Stephen Ministry, and she has done that. Under Mary Lou’s leadership, North Church now has six fully-trained and commissioned Stephen Ministers. What a visible sign of new life! Can these bones live? *Yes, these bones can live!*

A new group has just been formed in the church, thanks to the leadership of Jim McConnell, Brad Sparks, Jeff Weaver, and Alan MacLean. Yesterday 22 men gathered for breakfast in Westminster Hall as the first meeting of the Men's Group, and seven others wanted to come but couldn't. I was privileged to be a part of that gathering, and I can tell you that there was great energy and enthusiasm in that group. Can these bones live? Yes, *these bones can live!*

Fifteen months ago you elected your Pastor Nominating Committee to seek a new installed pastor for North Church. Two weeks ago their hard work came to fruition when you voted to call the Rev. Bill Hennessy as your new pastor/head of staff. He will come in June, so you don't have much longer to wait! That is exciting! Can these bones live? Yes, *these bones can live!*

We have seen many indications that God is indeed breathing new life into these bones. Now it's important to remember that we can't breathe new life into ourselves. Only God can do that. God told Ezekiel to say to the bones, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord: 'I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.'"

And yet, we are not to be passive bystanders, simply waiting for something to happen. Rather, we are called to be active participants with God, co-creators with God, in bringing this new life into being. Ezekiel was called to prophesy to the people, and the people had to be willing to receive and accept the new life offered to them.

Similarly, you are called to participate actively with God in bringing new life to dry bones and to accept the new life when it is offered. That means you need to be open to change, because new life will certainly bring change. You also need to be willing to fund the new life that is about to happen---in other words, to put your money where your vote was.

Can these bones live? Yes, *these bones can live*---if you want them to.