

## ***“A Second Wind”***

Adventures in the Bible Summer Series  
Week 2 of 3: Adventures on Land!

*Ezekiel 37:1-14*

New Revised Standard Version

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.  
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.  
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.

Toe bone connected to the foot bone  
Foot bone connected to the ankle bone  
Ankle bone connect to the leg bone  
Leg bone connected to the knee bone  
Knee bone connected to the thigh bone  
Thigh bone connected to the hip bone  
Hip bone connected to the back bone  
Back bone connected to the shoulder bone  
Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone  
Neck bone connected to the head bone  
Now hear the word of the Lord.

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.  
Now hear the word of the Lord<sup>1</sup>

I love that spiritual. It's based  
on Ezekiel 37 of course. But  
it's more than a catchy song,  
it's a cause for celebration.  
Why? Because from that which  
is cast out and thrown away,  
can come purpose. From that  
which is forgotten, can come  
recognition. From that which is  
unthinkable, can come the  
never-before-thought-of. From  
that which is hell bent and  
hardened, can come hope. From

that which is brittle, can come  
breath. From that which is  
destroyed, can come creation.  
From that which is decaying,  
can come dancing. From that  
which is putrid can come  
promise. From that which  
collects dust, can come  
something that casts dreams.  
From that which cannot  
breathe, can come a gasp of  
goodness. From that which is  
sucked dry, can come a second  
wind.

From whatever death, whatever  
doubt, whatever hardship,  
whatever depression, whatever  
destruction, whatever  
brokenness, whatever funk,  
whatever tragedy, whatever  
grief, whatever failure or fickle  
situation we find ourselves in,  
we can rise. God wants us to  
rise. And God wants us to  
return home. Just WHERE that  
home is is at the heart of this  
passage.

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<sup>1</sup> “Dem Bones” is a spiritual with melody by author and  
songwriter James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938) and his

brother, J. Rosamond Johnson  
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dem\\_Bones](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dem_Bones))

This vision is not a scene from the zombie apocalypse in *The Walking Dead* or the elephants' graveyard in *The Lion King*; this vision is a scene from Ezekiel's own prophetic imagination, giving us a saving second wind when we need it most.

I don't know about you, but I need a second wind right about now. It's super late on Saturday night and I'm exhausted. It's been a long week. It's been a long "who knows how long." Can I get an Amen?

I mean, I am a captive audience for Ezekiel's vision even though I am not in captivity like his original audience was.

You see, Ezekiel's vision is from the period of Israel's history known as the Babylonian Exile. In 597 BCE, the armies of Babylon (one of the most notorious, power-hungry enemies of Israel) forced the "rebellious" city of Jerusalem to surrender. We learn in 2 Kings 24 that in this defeat, the Babylonians (under the leadership of King

Nebuchadnezzar) deported the Judean king and many other Judean leaders to Babylon. Ten years later, in 587-586 BCE, after Jerusalem had rebelled yet again, the Babylonians completely destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple and deported a whole second wave of Judean leaders.<sup>2</sup>

Now among the first wave of the deported Judeans was the young Ezekiel, whom God called to be a prophet while he was in exile in Babylon.

*Mini sermon on the side here...consider this your a la mode to your apple pie:* sometimes when we are in exile, when we are surrounded by the unfamiliar, when we are swallowed up circumstances beyond our control, when we are, I don't know, impatiently waiting for a pandemic to pass, sometimes THAT is when God gives us a new call, a new purpose for our lives. Not when WE are intentionally looking for a new purpose or direction in life, but when we are ready to give up on life altogether, THAT is when God comes a

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<sup>2</sup> Rolf Jacobson, "Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14," *Working Preacher* (9 March 2008), accessed on 8 August 2020 at

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=39](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=39).

callin' on our lives. At least that's when it happened to Ezekiel.

So, pay attention. As we are all held captive by COVID, that doesn't mean that God has stopped calling you Calvary. In this time of quarantine, who, in our congregation, is God calling to bring us a word, a vision, of hope? Remember, in this story, it wasn't someone who was already a leader, it wasn't the Pastor Anne or Pastor Morgan or Pastor Alice or Pastor Mary of Judah - it was an "unknown, not-currently-a-leader" guy named Ezekiel.

So, I'm just saying, I hope you're listening to God. Because a lot of times our prophetic messages, our words from the Lord, the VERY words we need to sustain us in uncertain times, they DO NOT come from the mouths of the people who normally do all the talking. They come from *you*, the people, the congregation. We've gotta have at least a handful of Ezekiel's in our midst, I have no doubt. So listen to God, people.

Because Ezekiel WAS NOT a prophet when this whole exile thing started, but he came out of it as a prophet when it was all over because he listened to God when he was in the middle of it. This pandemic started 5-6 months ago and if we are still the same person, thinking the same thoughts, doing the same things, and longing for the same stuff as when it started... then we may not be listening to what God is saying or what God is doing in our lives. But, I digress. That's end of the mini-sermon...I hope you enjoyed your scoop of ice cream, back to the apple pie...back to the main point. But please, please, all you "yet-to-be-Ezekiel's" out there...don't bail on us...we need you!

So, Ezekiel. He is a newly called prophet in a foreign land, in captivity where the people have NOTHING of their former lives with them. Not the temple they used to worship in...not all the people they used to worship with...not their favorite restaurants or shops, not their favorite sports or TV stations, not anything. (You know what it's like when you travel and you can't find any station in English...how you

just long to hear your own language?) They didn't have the jobs they used to have, the houses they used to have; unemployment was at an all time high and the eviction notices were plastered on every door. It took ten years for it to hit all of them, but it was only a matter of time; the people were jobless, homeless, sanctuary-less, church-less, and they felt (and who can blame them) faith-less.

For these Judeans, these deportees forced to live in Babylon, the future seemed like a black hole into which they were destined to disappear. Not only was life as they once knew it gone, they feared nothing of their former life would ever return. They feared the unfamiliarity of their current circumstance would start to feel familiar, and therefore somewhat normal, and then they wouldn't even remember what it was that they once lost nor would they be able to imagine again, what a future could one day be.

Does it ever astonish you how relevant the Bible is

sometimes? I mean truly. You can't make this stuff up.

Now, the reason the Judeans who were in exile felt so despondent and hopeless is because a century-and-a-half before, citizens of their sister kin-dom, Israel, had also been deported. This was de-ja-vu. They had lost their identity and had faded away, they were known as --the so-called "lost tribes of Israel."<sup>3</sup> Judah didn't want the same fate! The fear of that, of losing their identity, their place in history, their purpose; it freaked them out.

You see, the exile was more than just a crisis of physical suffering and a loss of communal identity. It also was a crisis of faith. The key symbols of Judean faith--Jerusalem, its temple, its people, and the Davidic monarchy--those had been destroyed.<sup>4</sup> Just like our symbols seem destroyed, right? Our pews, our coffee cups, our hymnals, our church school classrooms, even our cardboard- paper-y communion wafers and our crumbly, dry

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<sup>3</sup> Jacobson, *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Psalms 89 and 137

gluten-free bread...who ever thought we'd miss those right?

The people struggled to hold on to faith because the things that reminded them of their faith, were fading away or, had been completely destroyed altogether.

In fact many exiled Judeans assumed that their God, had been defeated by a stronger god from Babylon. We know this from many of the lament psalms. Psalm 42:3 is just one example: "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, '*where is your God?*'"

The communal psalms of lament are an actual written record that the exiled people of God really wondered if the Lord was truly lord and if the Lord was truly faithful. Do you ever wonder where God is? Why God doesn't act? Why life is so hard? Do you ever wonder if God keeps any of the promises we read about in scripture?

Yes, yes, yes, and yes. I'm willing to bet we ALL wonder these things. But prophets like Ezekiel show us that wondering about these things, is actually part of the proclaiming of the good news itself. Just as we saw last week in the Exodus, in the Exile, lament precedes liberation.

Toward the end of this passage we hear their lament: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."<sup>5</sup> Again, we hear similar language in the lament psalms: "My strength fails, and *my bones* waste away."<sup>6</sup> "*My bones* are shaking with terror."<sup>7</sup> "*My bones* burn like a furnace."<sup>8</sup>

The reference to "bones" here is an idiomatic way of referring to one's deepest self, or, in the case of "our bones," a way for the community to refer to its most essential self. As Hebrew Bible scholar Rolf Jacobson says, this is why when Adam, in search of a partner finally finds Eve, he cries "This at last is bone of my bones."<sup>9</sup> This is home. This is familiar. This is

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<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 37:11

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 31:10

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 6:2

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 102:3

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 2:23

something I can recognize,  
something I can relate to.

So when the people say, ‘Our bones are dried up’”<sup>10</sup> They are expressing their helplessness and hopelessness. So Ezekiel shows them a vision of exactly that: dry bones. He matches their feelings, their spiritual and emotional existential crisis - with a vivid image they would understand.

Then after showing them that he was listening, that he knew how they felt, that he understood what they were experiencing and where they were coming from, after Ezekiel met them where they were at with this valley of dry bones image, he then invites them to lift their gaze to the God who has not forgotten them. He doesn’t leave them where they are, he brings them to a place where they can see a road home again...but not in the way you might think.

You see, while many point to Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones rising up and walking as a symbol of “resurrection,” a

more accurate understanding of the context of Ezekiel’s situation helps us understand that this is more about RESTORATION than it is resurrection.

The heart of the prophetic proclamation in this passage is in verse 14, when the Lord says, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own OWN SOIL, then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”

You see, “The question [this vision] answers is not the familiar, self-interested one, ‘Will I have life after death?’ but rather a more profound and encompassing one, ‘Will God honor God’s promises to us?’”<sup>11</sup> (155).

Think about it. What if Ezekiel 37 is not about helping a dead people live, but rather about helping a broken people heal, a disenfranchised people dream, an exiled people get excited about something, anything, again!? What if this text is about helping a disoriented and

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<sup>10</sup> Jacobson, *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Kevin J. Madigan & Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection: The Power of God for Christians and Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 146-155.

displaced and depressed people see that the circumstance they find themselves in today is not the end of the story? In the words of Chip & Joanna Gaines on FIXER UPPER, “No matter how much renovating they do, Exile is not their ‘forever home.’”

We need the message of hope that the resurrection brings, no doubt. Easter will always be the best story ever told and the best story ever lived by us. But it's not Easter is it? It's the middle of August. And the good news that Ezekiel is giving us is that Restoration is just as promising as Resurrection. Because there's almost nothing worse than feeling like all is lost and realizing that you're still alive and kickin' enough to realize that all is lost. Resurrection is good news for the dead, and for those times in our life where we have to grieve something that is absolutely and forever gone. But restoration is for the languishing and the longing; it's for those times where we feel exiled from life as we once knew it. Restoration is for those times when we know things will never be the same again, while also not yet knowing what they will be in the future,

while also knowing that things won't stay like this for ever.

Resurrection happens to the body all at once; restoration is a more complex process ...remember the toe bone connected to the foot bone, the foot bone to ankle, ankle to leg, let to knee, knee to thigh, thigh to hip, hip to back, back to neck, neck to head...that's a lot of connections!

The good news of restoration for a people in exile is not quite as clear cut as the good news of resurrection for a people in the tomb. New life after death is one thing; no doubt, an amazing gift. But figuring out a new way of living, while you're still alive? Well, that's a whole new ballgame isn't it?

Hello, 2020. Hello pandemics and protests. Hello coronavirus and closures and cancelled plans. Hello racial injustices and supremacist systems and militarized brutality. Hello presidential election season and political powerplays. Hello debates about virtual learning versus in-person classrooms. Hello mask mandates and massive unemployment. Hello world we never knew before

and yet find ourselves having to  
be an expert in. Hello life that  
was already hard enough and  
now seems to swing from being  
almost unbearable to  
unimaginatively laughable.  
HELLO WORLD of unending  
questions: HELLO “when’s it  
gonna end and how’d we get  
here / whose fault is it and  
whose gonna fix it / why are  
people marching / why aren’t  
more people protesting / why  
isn’t my voice being heard /  
whose voice am I not hearing /  
I can’t take it any longer and  
how long is it gonna last / I  
can’t plan anything in the future  
and yet somehow also seem so  
very unproductive in the  
present / what does it mean that  
I actually like not having to  
interact with people / are my  
kids gonna be messed up  
because they’re missing so  
much school / should I visit my  
oldest relatives and risk getting  
them sick or stay away and risk  
not seeing them again before  
they die / I think I might have a  
fever - did I wash my hands  
long enough - oh shoot I  
touched my face - why won’t  
this mask stay up - why are my  
glasses fogging up / why are  
people still hoarding toilet  
paper ” WORLD.

Hello to this new World. Call it  
exile. Or, heck, let’s be less  
technological and theological  
and less churchy and just call it  
“crazy.”

This world we are living in now  
is crazy. This is Ezekiel’s  
valley of dry bones. It has all  
the tell-tale signs of exile. We  
don’t want to be here. This  
wasn’t our choice. We don’t  
want to stay here and we don’t  
know when we get to go home,  
or go back. Everything that  
used to give us comfort or  
make life seem normal is no  
longer accessible. We are  
working so hard to survive that  
there’s no way we can thrive.  
How can it feel like we are  
running and running like  
hamsters on a treadmill even  
though we’re just sitting on a  
couch watching Netflix or  
working from home and not  
having to commute? Why does  
staying home feel so damn  
difficult?

Because home is not just a  
place, as we know. It’s a state  
of being. It’s the people we’re  
with. The patterns we know.  
The places we frequent. The  
pace of our lives, the  
particularities of what makes us  
tick and what helps us cope.



And when all of that is gone....it doesn't matter if the house we are sitting in has our name on the deed, it's not quite like home anymore if it's the only place we can ever be rather than being the place we take refuge in from everywhere else.

Exile is not just a physical state. It's an emotional, spiritual, and existential state too.

So, to my exiled, valley of dry bones, sisters and brothers and siblings --- what we need is some Spirit. Some breath.

That's the good news of Ezekiel's vision and that's the good news we need. Not a ventilator that keeps us breathing by an external system, but true *ruach* breath/wind of God that comes from within and sustains us day in and day out. It's the breath that created us. That is what makes these bones rise. That is what makes them live. Not oxygen. *Ruach*. The spirit, breath, wind, lifeforce of God.

It is the second wind we all so desperately need right now.

A "second wind" is a phenomenon in distance running, when an athlete who is out of breath and too tired to continue, suddenly finds the strength to press on at top performance with, ironically, LESS exertion. The feeling may be similar to that of a "runner's high", the difference being that the runner's high occurs after the race is over. The second wind occurs DURING the race.<sup>12</sup>

Here's what happens: heavy breathing during exercise is also used to provide cooling for the body. After some time the veins and capillaries dilate and cooling takes place more through the skin, so less heavy breathing is needed. It's a natural adjustment in the body that happens after you've been running a while. The increase in the temperature of the skin can be felt at the same time as the "second wind" takes place.

The phenomenon has come to be used as a metaphor for

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<sup>12</sup> Accessed at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second\\_wind](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_wind) on August 8, 2020.

continuing on with renewed energy past the point thought to be one's prime, whether in sports, career, or life in general.<sup>13</sup>

The Judeans in exile got their second wind through the vision of the prophet Ezekiel because all of the sudden they could see that the way they were feeling now wasn't going to be forever. God hadn't forgotten them. That's just a feeling. Feelings aren't facts. They inform us, but they do not define us.

Sometimes we can work so hard and breathe so heavily, we can get so caught up in our feelings about a situation that we forget about the faith we are called to have - a faith that doesn't always make sense, but that sustains us with hope...a faith that can cool us down when we are about to boil over or about to collapse in exhaustion.

This is the promise Ezekiel's vision gives us: the promise of restoration, of returning from exile is not about returning BACK to "home as we knew it before" but rather, turning to

God and realizing that in the presence of God, in the taking in of God's spirit, we are actually, in fact, already home. And this place has been here all along for us. It's just really hard to find sometimes. Like Dorothy, sometimes we need to follow the yellow brick road to Oz and back before waking up to the reality that we've never left home even though we don't recognize anything around us.

Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again.  
Now hear the word of the Lord.

The rising of exile is not about returning to home as we knew it before; it's about finding home in the place we are now, and trusting God's promise that wherever we are, God is.

The rising in this vision is about the rising of our lungs as we inhale the spirit of God, and the restoration in this passage is about restoring our sense of home in our own bones, in the deepest part of our being...not in some external location or circumstance, but in the very skin we walk around in. It's the only home we are ever

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

guaranteed...this body, this  
breath. So maybe this is the  
home we need to longing  
for...the home where the Spirit  
of God resides.

I'm breathing it all in. What  
about you?

Amen.