

From The Dry Bones of Despair to the Living Bones of Hope

A sermon by John Strommen on Ezekiel 37:1-14 Dec. 10, 2017

- I. I begin with a one minute video of the Delta Rhythm Boys singing and showing us Ezekiel's vision of dry bones and broken people being put back together again.

DRB clip...

There you have a classic African American Spiritual. The man credited with the lyrics of Dry Bones is **James Weldon Johnson**, an African American man who lived in the late 1800's and early 1900's. In addition to being one of the first African-American professors at New York University, Johnson is remembered best for his leadership within the NAACP, where he was a tireless opponent of racism and was instrumental in passing anti-lynching legislation.

Any guesses why the African American community might have gravitated to this vision of Ezekiel's?

Given the journey of the African Americans in this country, it's no wonder that they have felt a kinship with the Israelites of Ezekiel's time: a people like them who were forcibly deported to another country, discriminated against and often without hope. In fact, many African American spirituals were written during the post-slavery/Jim Crow years. These hopeful songs were written at the intersection of deep despair on the one hand, and of hope, on the other, that merges with it from beyond, from God. The book of Ezekiel and its promise of new life and resurrection produced two famous spirituals, "Dry Bones" and "Ezekiel's Wheel." Johnson in fact wrote that many preachers during those years preached on Ezekiel's dry bones text.

Do you ever feel like dry bones?

- II. Let's turn to the book of Ezekiel and his vision. For the third week in a row, we have a text that addresses the devastation that Israelites felt when they were exiles in the Babylonian Captivity, almost 600 years before Jesus' birth.

Into this grim landscape of hope and dreams that have died, we have a vision given to Ezekiel that, let's be frank, is a bizarre story and a little scary. In it, the vast, dusty valley of dry bones starts to clatter and rattle as the bones come together. Then the bones are clothed with flesh, but they're not alive yet. They need the breath of God to make them alive.

The truth is, this is kind of like creation happening all over again. It's a resurrection story. It's a creation story.

The Old Testament in fact often reads like new creation stories. From the new creation after the flood to the first born of a new covenant with Abraham and Sarah to a new and free people created out of slavery in Egypt, creation is a major theme.

Interestingly, in the dry bones vision, we have two different creation stories in one, both of them inspired by the first two chapters of Genesis. Many don't realize it, but biblical scholars believe that the

writer of Genesis 1 is a different writer than Genesis 2. Remember in Genesis 1 how God *spoke life* into existence with God's Word, and it reads like verses of a liturgy? And God said, "let there be light," and there was light. "Let the earth bring forth living creatures," and there were living creatures. "Let us make humankind in our image," and there was humankind.

But in the hands of the other creation writer in Genesis 2, the order of things being created is different and the way it is described is much earthier. There are mists, and God picks up dust and breathes into it, creating life. God *breathes life* into existence!

So, in one account, God speaks life into existence. In the other, God breathes life into existence.

Well, both writers are represented in Ezekiel and they're working as a tag team. When God says, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord" he is creating again just as in Genesis 1. God is speaking to the dry bones and suddenly they come together and are clothed with flesh and muscle!

But according to Ezekiel, the word of God isn't enough. Genesis 2 is needed also, for now God must breathe living breath into these suddenly fleshy bones! "Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

So Ezekiel's vision is a new creation account, synthesizing the word and breath themes. This vision of dry bones being reassembled and the people of Israel given life again was a promise from God that he is not yet done with them. They were still God's people and they would return to their home one day. The dry bones story is a reminder that God recreates us, even though we are in bondage to sin, and doomed to die; even though we are prisoners of a world that diminishes us in so many ways.

Even so, God speaks, God breathes, and we have life. And hope.

- III. There is no greater vision of a divine voice speaking and breathing and giving life to captive, hopeless souls, than in the movie "The Shawshank Redemption." This movie is about an inmate who is unjustly convicted for murder, but despite being surrounded by the dry bones of hopelessness, the Tim Robbins character, like a modern Ezekiel, is strangely alive as he speaks and acts out of a sense of hope. One day, he hijacks the intercom system of the prison and plays music he has selected. Tell me if you don't recognize dry bones coming to life.

Shawshank Redemption clip...

Isn't it great when he turns up the volume?

You think God doesn't speak through opera? Or through countless other ways? Whether you hear it in music, art, the spoken Word or in the community of saints, hear the Word of the Lord: God is not done creating and recreating you! This is what faith practices are: praying, dwelling in the Word, gratitude, carrying one another's burdens. All ways of "turning up the volume."

How can you turn up the volume? Amen.

