

**“New Life for Dry Bones”**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14 (God’s Word Translation)**  
**By John Gill**

The toe bone’s connected to the foot bone  
The foot bone’s connected to the ankle bone  
The ankle bone’s connected to the shin bone...  
... now hear the word of the Lord.

How many of you remember singing that little song when you were a child? I can recall singing it in Sunday School and VBS, and doing all the motions, pointing to each part of the body as we tried to remember which bone’s connected to which bone. (I considered inviting you to stand up and sing it with all the motions, but you’ll be glad I decided against it!)

It was always fun to sing that song because the other kids and I would pretend that we were dancing-skeletons, like the ones we see at Halloween.

But in all the time that I was growing up and singing that song, I don’t remember any Sunday School teacher ever telling us where that song came from, or read us the story from Ezekiel on which it is based.

Maybe that’s because this vision of Ezekiel is rather startling - and even frightening. But it actually is one of the most beautiful passages in the entire Old Testament – a scripture of hope and encouragement for Ezekiel’s time and for ours. And I think it can have special meaning for us at Sebastian UMC this morning.

Of course, this vision is a message from God to his chosen people. If ever any people needed a message of hope and encouragement, it was the Jewish people of Ezekiel’s day. Many of the people of God, including Ezekiel, were living in exile in Babylon, completely cut-off from the Promised Land and the Holy City of Jerusalem. They had been defeated at the hands of their Babylonian masters, and forced to live as refugees in a pagan land. Certainly, they felt like “a fallen army,” a nation of dry bones for whom there could be no future, and no hope.

But God offered his people a message of hope and promise – and, isn’t that always the way it is with God? When things look the darkest, God shines a beacon of light on us and gives us new hope. This message of hope comes to Ezekiel in the form of a vision – a vision which begins with a gruesome sight. In his vision, Ezekiel finds himself standing in a deserted valley surrounded by a sea of human bones. The bones were strewn about the landscape as if a great army had been slaughtered in battle, and left to rot where they fell. And the writer makes it a point to tell us that the bones had been there for a very long time – that they were very dry, bleached by the sun.

And then comes the crucial verse in the passage, a question which God uses to challenge Ezekiel’s faith: “Son of man, can these bones live?” It’s an important question, not only for the people of God during ancient times, but for the people of God today, as well.

There are certainly times in each of our lives when we feel like dry lifeless bones, for whom there seems no hope, no future. In the past, we felt a joy and exuberance about the future, life was good and we

were filled with hope. But then, some kind of tragedy struck – perhaps our marriage broke up, or our business failed, or we lost our job and can't find another one. Maybe our spouse or other family member became ill, became disabled, or died. It could be that we were diagnosed with a life-threatening illness and had to face the prospect of our own death. We all have had "dry bone" periods in our lives, times when it was easy to feel discouraged – even hopeless. And we ask ourselves, "can these bones live?"

If that describes you this morning, I want to let you know that I share your feelings. As some of you already know, I have been dealing with prostate cancer for the past nine years, and have had to deal with the emotional toll a cancer diagnosis can bring. During these years, I have certainly identified with those parched sun-bleached bones in Ezekiel's vision. Not knowing what lies ahead, I ask myself, "Can these bones live?"

If you are experiencing a dry bones period in your life, this vision is for you. I know it is for me. God won't leave us hopeless and discouraged, any more than he left the people of Israel without hope. He promises us, just as he promised them, that if we hear his word of hope, we will experience new life – When God's Holy Spirit blows across the battlefield of our lives, our spirits will be lifted and we will experience new life in him. Yes, Ezekiel's message is good news for each of us as individuals who may have lost hope in the future.

But this is also an important message for congregations that may be going through difficulties. There is good news in this vision for us at Sebastian United Methodist, as well.

Many congregations today feel like God's people in Ezekiel's day felt – and our church is no exception. When we look at our churches, and consider the spiritual health of our own lives, we can feel just as dry and dead as that army of bones on that battlefield. Circumstances in our lives and in our congregations have often caused us to become discouraged about our faith, and wonder if there is any hope for the future.

As you know, in recent years many congregations have been experiencing some decline in worship attendance and spiritual vitality. In fact, most churches today are going through a very difficult time as we are facing unprecedented challenges – as the culture becomes more and more secularized, fewer Americans are making worship a priority, and the younger generations are not seeking out Christianity for the answers to life as in generations in the past.

Like many congregations, our church faces some financial challenges, and we have tightened our belt so that we remain financially solvent. It's easy to become disheartened. If we're not careful, we can slip into a pessimism that is not healthy, a spirit of negativity that does not glorify God, but reveals shallowness of faith. The stresses churches like ours have faced in recent years may cause us to feel like dry bones strewn across a battlefield. It is easy to become discouraged about the future of our church, and to forget to rely on the Spirit of God to guide us through tough times to a brighter tomorrow.

Yes, many of us may be asking ourselves the same question God put to Ezekiel: "Can these bones live?" Is it possible that our lives and our congregation can experience revival and renewed vitality?

I hear God's words spoken through Ezekiel, and say, ABSOLUTELY, YES! I'm sure this church may be dealing with issues that are challenging, but they are not insurmountable! Even though it may

sometimes seem that we are a field of dry lifeless bones, I see lots of evidence that the Spirit of God is alive and well at Sebastian United Methodist Church!

I have already observed the love and concern that you show for one another when someone is in need, or has experienced a tragedy, or is facing an illness – this congregation is one of the most loving groups of people I have ever known.

We have folks who visit the sick and those homebound and in nursing homes to bring them encouragement and to remind them that they are loved.

We have people devoted to prayer for those with special needs, not only lifting them up to God, but willing to reach out to them with love by sending them cards and expressions of concern.

I am heartened by how many Lay Servant ministers this congregation has – the leaders who make the many ministries of this church possible.

We have wonderful faithful volunteers in our education ministry, Sunday School teachers for all ages, and Bible study teachers; church leaders who are leading our members into a deeper walk with Christ.

And we have an active ministry to the less fortunate, as we feed dozens of individuals and families in our community through our Welcome Table ministry, our Project Sandwich outreach, and our Grace in Action fund that allows the pastor to help folks in our church and community. Besides making money for our church, our Thrift Shop provides needed items at no cost for those have urgent needs. And we generously support our United Methodist Children's Home.

Our congregation has responded to hurricane victims and recovery by sending teams to show the love of Christ in tangible ways, when people are most in need.

We have a growing and vibrant youth ministry, thanks to faithful leader who are committed to investing in the lives of young people, helping them grow in Christ.

And we have an outstanding worship and music ministry, thanks to so many of you who share your talents with God and with our congregation.

Yes, there is lots of evidence that, in many ways, Sebastian UMC is alive and well. As I come to be your new pastor, I am filled with hope and encouragement and thank God that, despite all the challenges we may face, our church is NOT “a valley of dry bones.”

I see new evidence every day of the Spirit of God moving in and through the people of this church, and when I catch a glimpse of God's Spirit at work, it is thrilling to watch.

But, the truth is, sometimes we begin to burn out. We are primarily a congregation of seniors, and we aren't getting any younger. Even so, we keep very busy with many good things. But if we are honest, we have to confess that often, we are tired and are spiritually empty. Even with all that we do, it is clear that we are not as “alive” as we could be. Like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, we need to feel the breath of God breathing his Holy Spirit into our rattling bones, giving us new life, and a future of hope....

So, this morning, as a congregation, I want us to ask ourselves the same question God asked of Ezekiel: "Son of man, can these bones live?" Can Sebastian United Methodist Church have a revitalized future? Can we take on ligaments, and muscles, and skin? Can we feel the Spirit of God breathing the breath of life into our church, just as he breathed life into Adam at creation, and breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples at Pentecost? Can our church have a future which is filled with life and vitality – a future of hope and promise?

OF COURSE WE CAN! The Good News in our passage is that, no matter how spiritually dry we may sometimes feel, God can revitalize our lives and our church – if only we will let him do it!

And how do we do that? In Ezekiel's vision, God says: "Prophecy to these bones. Tell them, 'Dry bones, listen to the word of the LORD.'" In other words, as individuals and as a congregation, we must learn to listen to the Word of the Lord – for OUR church. We must pray fervently, and claim God's promise of new life.

That's why I am issuing us a challenge this morning: I'm calling on every member and friend of this church to covenant together to pray EVERY DAY for the Holy Spirit to revive your life and our congregation. At the close of my message this morning, you will be invited to stand if you are willing to commit to this challenge to pray. As we stand in our own "valley of dry bones," by faith you and I can behold the miracle of new life made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

God offers us a future with hope, but only if we seek to discern his will, and have the unity and courage to move in the direction he leads us. And the only way for us to know God's will for the future of our church – is to pray.

If we will allow God's Spirit to move in our own personal lives, if we open ourselves to his power and presence, then we will discover new life and renewed vitality and purpose for our lives. From the skeletons of despair and death which entrap us, God will give us a resurrection of hope through the power of Jesus Christ.

And if we will allow God's power to move in our church, his Holy Spirit will fill our spiritual emptiness, give life to our dry and brittle bones – and heal us, and fill us, and restore us, and rejuvenate us, and raise us up as a mighty army for the Lord. He will energize us with his Spirit, set us on fire for Christ, and send us out into the world to overcome the powers of evil and retake the world for God. Our prayer is the same as that old gospel hymn:

Revive us again;  
Fill each heart with Thy love;  
May each soul be rekindled  
With fire from above.

Pray for God to "revive us again!"

Still, the question echoes down the centuries: "Son of man, can these bones live?" And the answer is, "By all means!" As God spoke through Ezekiel, he speaks today to us:

"Son of man,... the people... are like these bones. The people say, 'Our bones are dry, and our hope has vanished. We are completely destroyed.' So prophesy. Tell them,... I will open your graves and take you

out of them... I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live... Then you will know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'" (from Ezekiel 37:11-14)

That is God's promise to Sebastian United Methodist Church, and to each and every one of us this day. May God bless our congregation as we cling to his promise of resurrection life. AMEN.

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As I mentioned a moment ago, I am challenging each one of you to join me in praying daily that the power of God's Holy Spirit might fall upon our congregation and one each one of us.

If you are willing to agree to do that, please stand where you are, and join in praying in unison this prayer: (projected ? printed?)

Let us pray:

O God that gives breath to our lives and to your church, we hear your ancient question addressed to us: "Can these bones live?" And we know the answer: "Yes, but only when our life comes from you." So we invite your Holy Spirit to breathe new life into the dry bones of our lives, and the dry bones of our congregation – healing us, filling us, restoring us, rejuvenating us, and raising us up as a mighty army for you. Breathe on us, Breath of God, fill us with life anew. Revive us again! Amen.