

March 9, 2008  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick  
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## *Breathing Bones*

David Gaewski (The Maine Conference Minister who was going to preach today. He got caught in Cleveland by the weather.) had chosen the Ezekiel text out of today's lectionary readings, so I decided we'd stay with that.

Ezekiel was a priest who lived in a time of great turmoil, over 500 years before the time of Jesus. During his ministry the city of Jerusalem was captured and destroyed and many of the people, including Ezekiel, were taken into exile in Babylon. Most of the book is written in the form of visions. The one we heard today, the valley of dry bones, is one of his visions of hope for the restoration of the people.

After the last couple of days, it may be a little hard for us to imagine a valley of dry bones. However, having lived in a desert for many years, I can tell you that it can be so dry it shrivels your skin, you can taste the dirt in the air when the wind picks up, and the bones left out in the open become bleached white in the sun. Life feels very precarious in such a setting. Such is Ezekiel's valley. 'Dem bones. 'Dem bones. 'Dem Dry bones.

With all the forensic investigation shows on television these days – all the variations on CSI (Crime Scene Investigation) - we are very aware of what a human body can tell us about how a person has died. If the skin, flesh, and sinews are still there, there is a

multitude of information. Yet, even with just the bones there is much to be learned.

Ezekiel uses this universal symbol of a human skeleton as a sign of despair. It reminded me of Shakespeare's Hamlet, as he holds a skull, saying the famous line, "Alas poor Yorik." Wanting to refresh my memory, I googled this line. One of the things that came up was a picture of a human skull with the words "Alas poor Yorik" at the top of the page. But the skull was wearing a headband - a headband of bunny ears - large white fluffy bunny ears, with pink velvet for the inner part of each ear. It's a bit jarring, at first. Then the tag line continues at the bottom of the page..."prepares for Easter."

"Alas poor Yorik...prepares for Easter." A bit bizzarro in appearance, but I think Ezekiel would say, "Yeah, you got it!" It's about new life. It's about God bringing hope to the hopeless. It's about God's spirit bringing new life where things appear to be a dead end. It's about resurrection.

We are not unfamiliar with "dry bones" experiences. Just read the newspaper, listen to the radio, or watch TV – any day.

Interracial and interreligious violence still continues in Jerusalem, as evidenced by the killings in the Jewish

seminary this week– 2,500 years after Ezekiel’s time.

We are mindful of those whose economic future is withering on the vine – more difficulty finding jobs, home foreclosures, and credit cards overloaded trying to handle medical expenses.

Some young people find themselves caught in families or friendships of violence and violation.

Ezekiel says that there is hope – there is the possibility of new life – from the inside out. He understood anatomy – first the sinews will be reconnected, then the flesh will be restored, and then the skin will hold it all together. Great. The body is whole again. But wait. That’s not enough. The breath must be breathed into the body.

This ‘breath’ word is one of my favorite Hebrew words. And I think it’s one of the most significant words in the Hebrew Scriptures. The word is ruah – which means wind, breath, spirit, all at the same time. In this valley of dry bones vision there is a constant word-play between wind, breath and spirit.

These past few months we have been traveling through a dry bones time in our life together as Larry resigned his position. It has rattled our bones. We are the body of Christ in this time and this place and we are feeling wounded. Some parts of the body feel that the breath has been knocked out of them, and some are even feeling broken. For those most involved in the leadership activities of the church and the day-to-day functioning of our life together it has been an intense time.

In such a time we keep our eyes open for Spirit Sightings - signs of the movement

of the spirit, moving among us, breathing hope and new life into our tired bones.

I want to mention three Spirit Sightings. First, all the people who have stepped forward to help – parents helping with youth group, deacons helping with worship, and retired clergy with pastoral care. However, I want to offer you an invitation. Even with two clergy it is impossible to keep up with everyone in this congregation. In this time especially, **care for one another** – offer a listening ear, call or send a card to those you haven’t seen, let us know in the office if there is a particular need. As the Westminster Choir’s anthem said, practice “patience, tenderness and goodness” with one another.

Another Spirit Sighting is all the people who are participating in the small group conversations with Larry Peers. It is important for Larry to hear what we have to say, but equally important is the opportunity for us to hear what each other has to say. Those who have already participated have said that they were glad to hear from one another – it just wasn’t long enough – and they are hoping for more opportunities to talk together – not just about the past – but about the present and the future. In other words, to continue to put flesh and spirit on this body that binds us one to another.

A third Spirit Sighting was the gathering of potential new members last week after church. We usually ask two questions: 1. What is your religious heritage? 2. What brings you to FPC?

I want to share with you the things they said in answer to the second question. I could summarize their answers, but

instead I'm going to just read them to you.

What brings you to FPC?

- Building grabs you
- Programs our family needs
- Family member goes here
- Active program for children
- A need to get back to church
- Want to get involved in community
- People are friendly
- Being inclusive is important
- Church shopped –selected FPC
- Like to see youth
- Like music
- Music brought us here
- Interested in Benevolence program
- Like to see youth
- Stewardship to wider community
- Warm church
- Multigenerational
- Good sermons
- Good teaching from pastors
- Choir is incredible
- Children's music program
- Confirmation program
- Looking for cong. Church
- Youth programs
- Important to have older adults

Some of the things that people mentioned are things that we can and do organize and orchestrate. Yet, that is not enough. Ezekiel's vision reminds us that we can connect things, flesh them out, and even present them with a glorious cover of skin. But unless our body is open to the breathing spirit of God we will miss opportunities for new life. Unless enlivened by the Spirit, we may look alive but not necessarily be alive.

How do we do that? Pay attention to and be open to the Spirit? We are already doing a number of things that help.

Talk together, study together, serve the wider community together, worship together, pray together, and be silent together....

In the midst of all our activity and even at times our anguish it is often hard to settle down... to let our bones and our minds rest enough... so that we can become more attuned to that still small voice that is trying to get our attention. Become more attuned to the ways of the spirit so that we will be able to sight it right in our midst... Become more open to allowing the spirit of God to breath new life into our common body....

As we enter into a time of silence may the Spirit be in us, among us, and through us.

*(silence)*