

“The Awakening Spirit”

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11

Northfield UCC Church

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5th Sunday of Lent

I have just finished an important new book with a less than felicitous title: *Corpse Care*. It traces burial practices in America. Did you know that embalming developed during the Civil War as families wanted their soldiers return for burial at home? Field embalmers often followed troops from battle to battle, offering their services to those not fortunate enough to make it out alive. After a soldier left the embalming table, he could be placed into a coffin and put on a train heading homeward.

Perhaps you been paying attention to the “green burial movement.” It is much more eco-friendly than cremation, which I had presumed to be more socially conscious than traditional casket and vault. In whatever way we think about the care of the deceased body, we know that simply leaving bones on a field is not an acceptable human practice. But I am ahead of myself.

Let’s situate this enigmatic text historically. Well, what do you know about Ezekiel? As we can best reconstruct it, his time as God’s prophet to the house of Israel lasted from 593 BCE until the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. He was an iconoclast, dismantling the orthodox theology of his day—the notions

that God had promised at Sinai to bless the covenant people unfailingly, God's absolute commitment to the David dynasty, and the inviolability of Jerusalem, the site of the Temple. This prophet argued that God would allow other nations to overrun Judah, and his own existence in exile was an expression of that reality. In other words, they could not presume unassailable privilege in a time of utter disregard for covenantal obligations.

And Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed, what no one thought could happen. After this destruction, the tone and content of his oracles shifted, which is what we hear in chapter 37. Transported by the Spirit, the prophet has a vision. Ezekiel surveys a travesty—heaps of bones left to be bleached by the sun is cavalier, disrespectful, and speaks of a desolate people. Perhaps this vision reflects the deep distress and sense of resignation experienced by at least some of the exiles after years in Babylonia:

“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

God gives the prophet a hard task: preach to these bones, telling them that they will come back to life. And so he does. At first the reconstruction of these bodies does not contain life; only when the Spirit begins to breathe through them is there restoration.

The Hebrew word for breath *ruach* can also be translated as wind or spirit. I love the fluidity of the word as it can relate both to humanity and the

divine. This is a remarkable vision of holy breath entering them so that they could stand up. The layering of bone, sinews/tendons, flesh, and skin reverses the order of their decomposition. I can only respect his refusal to abandon faith in God in the midst of crippling tragedy.

This is more than a zombie scene; it is a vision of hope for a community that comes out on the other side of violence and trauma. The prophet is seeking to persuade the readers/hearers of his word from God that a new perception of their reality is possible. If they could accept that God had a vision for their future flourishing, perhaps they could construct a hopeful story for their people.

The future story we construct transforms the present. You see we cannot do anything about the past; how we envision the future can transform how we live in the present. My friend Andy Lester at Brite Divinity worked on this theory as he saw how many let the stories of others shape their hopes in a harmful way.

A man in his late forties began to experience depression. He came to Dr. Lester and together they realized that his dread came from his family's history—his grandfather and father had died in their early 50's, but they had far different health patterns than his more disciplined life. The task was to construct a different future story. We cannot do anything about the past, but

too many of us are fixated on it. It is the vision of the future that can transform the present.

The passage from the epistle helps with this task. Those who dwell in the Spirit are no longer confined to the destructive impulses of the flesh—nor to its utter destruction. Living by the power of the awakening Spirit grants a future hope. And without hope, we are as good as dead.

Where does the Spirit need to awaken us to a more lively hope? Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has observed that Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dried bones bears no date *because every generation needs to hear in its own time that these bones can live again.*¹

As I think about where we find ourselves in a deeply divided country, I ponder this vision. Who are the many left for dead in our consumption driven economy? Whose bodies are ignored as the medical field grants greater attention to the wealthy? Hence health disparities grow. Whose land is considered expendable?

Importantly, these texts are not primarily about individual hopes. When the valley of dry bones stands up, it is a vast gathering. The reclaiming power of God is widely inclusive and the future with hope is indiscriminate in its

¹ Elie Wiesel, “Ezekiel,” in *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible*, ed. David Rosenberg (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 186.

reach. Actually, it seems to give preferential option to those wronged. Lack of care for this army of Israelites must be put to right.

Participating in the resurrection of the Body of Christ is always a corporate experience, also. Christian faith is about an interdependent way of living that leans upon God and others to flourish. As John Wesley put it, Christianity “knows nothing about solitary faith.”

The theological affirmation of these text is that the power of the Spirit can awaken new life. Wherever we find ourselves, we are not out of reach of the Spirit.

I just completed a novel written by Clyde Steckel, a former dean and professor at United, sometimes called Mr. UCC. He writes of a former dean of architecture at Columbia whose life has been spent in pursuit of drinking, carousing, and professional arrogance. He did not do well in marriage; his colleagues found him aloof; his buildings at times are given less than stellar reviews. Yet, late in life, the Spirit touches him through the music of a young German chorus *Gaudeamus Igitur*, which means “Therefore, Let Us Rejoice.” As tears stream down his face, he realizes that it is the “therefore” that matters; it calls you to pay attention to everything in your life you should celebrate—giving thanks for all those things you take for granted. Therefore frames meaning and hope.

The Spirit awakens us to our lives and the promise that they hold. Therefore means we are not yet finished. Each is a gift with profound contributions to make to others as together we make our slow way across the earth. Yet each of us has areas of life that feel as if death lurks there as cherished dreams ebb and the challenges of life threaten to overwhelm. The Spirit seeks to call us back to life as God relentlessly seeks our wellbeing. We are not abandoned even when we bear the hard consequences of our choices—as did Jerusalem.

So let us try to allow God's vision for human flourishing to shape our own hopes. Let us invite the Spirit to continue to make all things new.