

"Bones, Flesh, and Spirit"

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¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." ⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹²Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD."
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

When God asked Ezekiel this question, everything the prophet knew of life and living had to be pointing to a definitive "no." The hand of the Lord had transported Ezekiel in a vision to a dry valley. He is shown a landscape littered with skeletons, remains of people who had once been alive but now clearly were not. The bones, we are told, were "very dry." Ezekiel knew that bodies this far gone do not come back. Still, he could not seem to bring himself to be this truthful to God.

"Mortal, can these bones live?"

"O Lord God, you know."

Ezekiel didn't want to say, "I just don't see it, Lord. I really doubt it, Lord." Even a battered and broken Job had said to God "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."¹ The most Ezekiel could muster was a weak "maybe?"

Undeterred by his noncommittal answer, God starts with the bones. It was the logical place to start. The bones were the only things left. In a way, it was a head start as compared to God's original creation of humankind, when the Lord scooped up a handful of dust and molded it into Adam.² In the valley, there was — literally — a skeletal structure. It was a dead, lifeless structure, but a structure nonetheless.

¹ Job 42:2.

² Genesis 2:7.



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People who buy and sell properties will often say that a house may need a lot of work, but it has “good bones.” I’ve heard that term used to describe congregations, too. “There may be a few problems here and there,” they say, “but that church has good bones.” In the case of churches, I need to clarify that the statement has nothing to do with the layout or structure of the church building. It speaks to the human organization. When a church has “good bones,” it means there is integrity and potential in the congregation on which good things can be built. This is something we can say with honesty and confidence to the officers who are being ordained and installed today. Yes, we have some work to do, but you are being called to serve a congregation that has really good bones.

At the presbytery meeting this past week, we heard one of the current Co-Moderators of the PC(USA), Denise Anderson, deliver one of the most powerful sermons I’ve heard in a long time. Focusing on this same passage from Ezekiel, she observed that the bones in the valley may represent the very hardest parts of us... the most entrenched and rigid parts of our lives before God. That is why they last long after everything else has fallen away. The bones, she said, represent the things that we hold onto the hardest, the things we give up last. These are the things we know for sure, or think we know for sure, or hope we know for sure. Before life can return to those kinds of bones, she said, they would need to regain some flexibility and fluidity. The dryness and rigidity would need to soften.

So, God begins with the bones, but it is still obvious that the bones cannot live on their own. “Mortal, can these bones live?”

“Not like this, Lord.”

Bones are only the scaffolding for those things that really make life possible — a circulatory system and blood to fill it; a respiratory system and air to refresh it; a digestive system and healthy food to energize it; a nervous system to communicate and govern it all... to make space for love and wisdom, language and music, science and imagination; a muscular system that can translate will into action. The body, to live, needs flesh.

In the church, that means people. We can have structure, we can have good bones, but for the church to live we need people who are present and ready to love and to serve. The church needs brains, the church needs heart, the church needs muscle. “*I will lay sinews on you,*” the Lord says, “*and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin...*” Those of you who are answering the questions of ordination and installation today have stepped up to be hearts, minds, and muscle for the church. You are committing your energy maintaining the life and vitality of this congregation. Much of your job now will be to help others to make similar choices... to encourage more members to get active in the life of this congregation and increase what is possible on and around these good bones.

With a refreshed skeleton and renewed flesh, things are at least looking better. “But mortal, can these bones *live*?” “Lord, I’m certainly more optimistic.” But I am still not sure, because everything we have talked about so far is human. The structure and the plan and the strength of the bones... the heart and the muscle of the flesh... this is the kind clay that we humans work with all the time. We can see a need, we can imagine a project, we can make a smart plan, and we can get out there to put hammer and nails to it. We can call volunteers to give of their time. We can raise money to fund the vision, just as we are doing right now for a literal building with Habitat for Humanity. As humans, these things are within our grasp. But these are human things, and as good as these things are, they are incomplete in the kingdom of God, because Ezekiel said he looked at those bones, “*and*

there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but still there was no breath in them.”

Not many people know that Mary Shelley wrote her most famous novel when she was just eighteen years old... as part of a bet. She was spending a dismal, dreary night in Switzerland with Lord Byron and the man who would become her husband, a talented poet and writer named Percy Shelley. Passing the time with ghost stories, Byron proposed that each of them write a story of their own to see who could come up with the best one. Mary decided to weave her tale on a framework of science — specifically, the strange, dark, even macabre science of the early 1800’s that was obsessed with the idea of bringing life back to a dead corpse with electricity or other means.

I’m pretty sure she won the bet, because her story is the only one anybody ever talks about anymore. Her main character, Victor Frankenstein, assembled a creature in his laboratory. He does not share the details — as he never wanted anyone to replicate the sin of his work — but somehow he assembled a skeleton and cobbled it together. He then laid sinew upon it, adding flesh and parts. The moment when life entered the creature is left completely vague in the same way. “With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony,” the scientist says, “I collected the instruments of life around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet.”³ While none of these details are in the book, Hollywood has expanded this moment of life-giving into a spectacle of flashing gadgets and pulsing electrical arcs. In the 1931 movie starring Boris Karloff, the creature is lifted up on a gurney up into the heart of a lightning storm. When the creature is lowered back down, a cackling Victor Frankenstein screams “It’s alive! Now I know what it feels like to be God!”⁴

It makes for memorable science fiction, but as children of God we know that cobbling together a body and running lightning through it is not really life; it’s a barbecue. That is the main point of this valley full of skeletons. It’s not about the bones, although they are certainly part of it. It’s not about the flesh, although that is a part of it, too. None of those things come to much of anything without the part that only God can play. Only God can bring the Spirit that breathes true life into us and into the church. “*I will cause breath to enter you,*” God says, “*and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.*”

The Hebrew word that makes the point is *ruach*. It can mean “breath,” as it does in this passage. It can be translated “wind,” as it is in Genesis 1, when the wind of God is blowing and hovering over the surface of the waters. And it can mean “Spirit,” as it does in Genesis 6, when the Lord says “*My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh...*” Usually, it seems that all three of these meanings are at play when *ruach* is used. That is certainly the sense we get in this valley. God will bring life with the breath; God will be the wind that renews the life in the bones; and only the Spirit can make these bones live.

That is the primary lesson to be learned on this Pentecost Sunday, as we once again call on the Holy Spirit to breathe life and vitality into the church. We can do all kinds of human things to cobble ministry together: casting visions, making plans, hiring contractors, gathering people together to be heart and muscle in this ministry, but without

³ Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein; or the Modern Prometheus*, from *The Essential Frankenstein*, Leonard Wolf ed. (New York: Penguin, 1993), p. 85.

⁴ Bina Venkataraman, “The Problem With ‘Playing God’” www.slate.com, accessed May 18, 2018.

the Spirit, without the breath and wind of God, those efforts will not live — at least not in the way we hope they will. We might even try to shock them into vitality with renewed energy, but as Isaiah said, if we do it on our own power even our most righteous attempts will end up as filthy rags.⁵ We may not go as wrong as Victor Frankenstein did, but we can be sure that the creatures we cobble together on our own will not have the heavenly effects we seek. Our prayer must be that God will animate and sustain our efforts at mission and ministry with the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit.

The only problem with this prayer is that the Spirit does not mind our human boundaries very well. The Spirit is not inclined to respect our requests, spoken or unspoken, that it do one thing, but not another... that it go this far, but no farther. In other words, if we open the doors of this church to the wind of the Holy Spirit, things are going to get blown around. Not everything will stay neatly in its current place. "*The wind blows where it chooses,*" Jesus says, "*and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*"⁶ Whether we like it or not, this is how God creates life... not according to our human rules or expectations... but only in the way that God determines it must be born.

In the year 1654, the French mathematician, scientist, and inventor Blaise Pascal was alone in his study. A child prodigy, he had become one of the most brilliant minds of his age. He was amazing at human things. He built one of the first mechanical calculators, a precursor to modern computers. He developed foundational concepts in calculus and social science. He could do it all. But something had been missing. He felt an emptiness in himself and his work. Just 31 years old, Pascal felt he was running on empty. But on the night of November 23rd, 1654, from about 10:30 p.m. until 12:30 a.m., the Holy Spirit blew into Blaise Pascal's life. The only record we have of the experience is what he scrawled onto a piece of parchment in those moments, a piece of paper that he would sew into the lining of his coat so it would remain near his heart for the rest of his life.⁷ These are the words:

*"FIRE... GOD – not the one of the philosophers or of the learned,
but the GOD of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...
Certitude. Certitude. Feeling. Joy. Peace.
GOD of Jesus Christ. My God and your God...
Righteous Father, the world has not known you, but I have known you.
Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy... Renunciation, total and sweet.
Complete submission to Jesus Christ and to my director!"⁸*

This is what we seek, in our own lives and in the life of the church: the certainty and joy that the Holy Spirit brings. Only God can breathe life into something that seems to be dying. So let us seek and welcome that holy wind, knowing that it cannot be controlled, knowing that it might blow some things around, but still trusting in its divine will for us. Today, the Lord's question is pressed to you and me, here and now, and we, too, must decide how we will answer.

"Mortal, do you believe? Can these bones live?"

⁵ Isaiah 64:6.

⁶ John 3:8.

⁷ <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/in-and-out-in-a-blaise-of-glory>

⁸ <https://churchpop.com/2016/04/19/night-fire-blaise-pascals/>