

Pentecost combined service; new members; mtgs b/4 and after  
June 8, 2014, Boone UMC; Jason Byassee

## Bones

It is good to be all together in one place Boone Methodist. In a moment Pastor Vern will preach from Acts 2 when the disciples were all together *in one place*. You'll see what happened next. I wonder what God will do among us all together here in this one place?

Let's start with a question. What do you think of when you think of God? How do you imagine God in the eye of your heart? Most of us imagine God up. Heaven is that way. Many imagine God as a kindly grandfather. Scripture compares God to a nursing mother who cannot forget her child. We Christians know we don't have to just imagine. God has shown us who God *is*. Jesus. I hope when you imagine God you always think of the man from Galilee.

Here's another answer. Imagine God as your own breath. Breathe in with me and hold it for a moment. Go ahead. Now breathe out slowly. God is closer than that. Our life depends on God like that. God *is* a fresh breath of air—life giving, nurturing, glorious. Sometimes Christians practice breathing prayer. As you breathe in you pray something and as you breathe out you pray something more.<sup>1</sup> My favorite is this, to breathe in, and while breathing out pray this way, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." Do that ten times and you'll be ready to face the day. It's the whole gospel in one breath.

The story I'm about to read to you imagines the Holy Spirit as a *mighty* breath. A hurricane. A 200-mph blast that can rip the bark off trees. Only this hurricane doesn't destroy. It *creates*. It lifts Israel up out of her grave and puts flesh on her bone, and makes a people where there was only death. As I read, every time you hear the word breath or wind or blow or breathe think of God the Holy Spirit. The word for wind and the word for Spirit is the same word in Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> Ruach. Say it with me, use the little throat thing if you can, *ruach*. And in Greek the word for Spirit and the word for wind is also the same, pneuma.<sup>3</sup> The "p" is silent. Not as fun to say but let's do it anyway, pneuma. Listen to how wild and creative and life-giving our hurricane of a God is.

Ezekiel 37

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer on screen plz

<sup>2</sup> On screen: Ruach

<sup>3</sup> On screen: Pneuma

*The 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. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to the bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 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. 7 So 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. 8 I 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. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11 Then 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.' Therefore 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. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I 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."*

This is the word of God, for you, the Pentecost people of God, thanks be to God.

Our story starts out not very hopeful. A valley full of dry bones. Not much life there. The image I have is a Matthew Brady photograph of the Civil War, when the photographer got to the battlefield before the gravediggers did.<sup>4</sup> Here's one. This week is the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Civil War battle of Cold Harbor, where 7000 Americans died in 20 minutes, as many as the US has lost in the entire decade-plus war in Afghanistan. 20 minutes. Ezekiel's vision is grimmer still. These skeletons can't be identified. Ezekiel doesn't even know they're Israel. Their own mothers wouldn't recognize mere bones. Hope is lost. These dead haven't even been given a decent burial, the buzzards aren't even interested anymore.

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<sup>44</sup> <http://www.environmentalhistory.org/revcomm/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/4-7two-figures-brady-gardner-antietam-bw.jpg>

And I'm betting that's how you feel sometimes. All hope is past lost and you don't even bother to glance up anymore.

Remember Hurricane Floyd? 15 years or so ago? Was supposed to destroy our state's coast, and instead just dumped rain on it? Well who knew how bad the rain could be. The flooding was so intense in eastern NC it churned up the ground and coffins came up, dozens of them, floating away. Wonder whose job that was to fix? No hope there at all, so awful it's sort of funny.

I've been reading *The Last American Man* about Eustace Conway and Turtle Island here in Watauga County. He's a modern day Daniel Boone, living totally off the land, and thinks we should all do the same, live in teepees we make from deer we kill. Not for me, but he's fascinating. He rode his horse Hobo from here to the Pacific Ocean, thousands of miles, rode right into the surf. Then once he was home here he went leisurely riding one day and Hobo tripped on a rock, snapped his leg, and Conway had to shoot him. Imagine making it 2400 miles with a friend of a horse and then that. Conway let the vultures eat his friend so he could come back the next spring and he saw, sure enough, the horse had had a stress fracture already, probably had it before he bought him. Bones can tell a story, even if not a very hopeful one.

These bones in Ezekiel are past hope, like in our lives, like floating coffins, like a horse who can only tell a silent story, picked clean by carrion. Israel is in exile. Most Jews have died. God's city is destroyed. God's temple is ash. Israel is commemorating its own funeral. They figure this means *God is gone*. There is no atheism like the atheism *in* the bible. Ezekiel says not so fast. Who says bones can't live?

God has Ezekiel preach to the bones. Now, not a few preachers have felt this way, preaching to bones. Not a few business leaders have, when you buy an abandoned piece of property and it looks desolate, how can this business live? Some of you who rehab houses must have seen this when you buy something, cobwebs, rotted wood, how can people live here? Ezekiel sees bones but God sees people. He preaches, and there's a noise, a rattling, bone coming to bone.

Songs have made this story famous. Dem bones dem bones dem dry bones. Imagine the sound of that rattling. We sang a more recent song from John Mark McMillan this morning,

Skeleton bones stand at the sound of eternity  
On the lips of the found

And gravestones roll  
To the rhythm of the sound of you

The bones stand at attention, flesh on them, skin on them, but they do not breathe yet. They are like Adam on his first day, made from dust, but no breath in him yet.

I met a church planter from France this week. Must be tough, I said. Empty churches, little faith, how do you do it? He shook his head. “You don’t understand,” he said. “We are opening a new church in France every ten days. We plan to open one every five days soon.” What? There’s a revival among evangelicals in France? Who knew? They meet in former bakeries, apartments, storefronts, in parks for picnics and worship. Apparently a people tired of no hope are finding hope again. I love the way God works. We’re hoping for something similar with our King Street Church opening this summer downtown. That’s the Holy Spirit, turning bones into believers, death into grace. How’d it happen? I asked. The French church planter said, “The tears of my father’s generation seeded the ground for this.” Life where there was none.

God tells Ezekiel to preach again. This time the wind comes into the bodies and they breathe and live, a vast multitude. Israel reborn, returned to her land, every promise of God made good. I don’t know about you, I sure wish God would keep his promises without the grave part. But God doesn’t give us Jesus’ resurrection without Jesus’ cross. God doesn’t always come when you want him, but he’s always on time. Or as Rick Doty told me yesterday, God is very seldom early, but he’s never late.

This is the church God dreams about. One reborn, flush in the face with life, newborn as little Chapman Blalock in our church, newborn as the faith of our newly baptized, newborn as one of our eldest saints who is closest to God. This is why we launched a trail yesterday. It’s why we’re having VBS for adults and not just kids—please invite your friends! Think of folks you have prayed would believe or become part of a church—this is who we’re aiming at. Resurrection is why we are a church at all—not just Jesus’ resurrection, but ours’. God takes our bones and puts flesh on them and gives us mouth to mouth and we live. *Isn’t it good to be here at all?!*

I want to close with two stories from a friend’s new book on prayer. MaryKate Morse writes of a man terribly jealous of two coworkers. The breaks had come their way and not his. And he was *jealous*, and *miserable* for being jealous. He found himself focused on a verse from Philippians, “In humility, regard others as better than yourselves.” And he thought of all the Holy Spirit does for us, gives life to our bones. And the good work his friends are doing. And he prayed, on the inhale he

prayed,<sup>5</sup> “In humility,” and on the exhale he prayed,<sup>6</sup> “Regard others as better than yourselves.” And he felt joy for his friends’ accomplishments. And joy for himself having joy in them. Let’s pray that shall we? In humility regard others as better than yourselves.

A second story. A teacher was nervous before her first day in the classroom. And so she prayed to the Holy Spirit, “Spirit, focus on me.” She inhaled first,<sup>7</sup> and then prayed it on the exhale, “Spirit focus on me.” And the Spirit did. And she focused. And every student who walked in she saw as a walking sign of resurrection. Because that’s what every *breathing* human being is.

Pray with me one last time, inhale first,<sup>8</sup> now exhale, “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Happy Pentecost. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> On screen plz

<sup>6</sup> On screen plz

<sup>7</sup> On screen plz

<sup>8</sup> On screen plz