

This I Believe
Ezekiel 37:1-14
May 2, 2008
Baccalaureate at St. Andrews Presbyterian College
Laurinburg, NC

NT
Old Testament Lesson

37 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. 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, "Prophesy 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, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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 prophesy, 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.

THE WORD OF GOD FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD

I would like to thank the powers that be at St. Andrews Presbyterian College who invited me to be with you today. I consider it an honor and a privilege to be with you.

Upon seeing the article in the paper that informed the community that I would be the preacher for baccalaureate, one of the folks in my congregation, congratulated me—sort of—by saying: *They usually get a **famous** speaker from somewhere else.*

Well, St. Andrews is known for its Liberal Arts avant-garde manner of doing things in a different way. St. Andrews zigs when all the others zag.

I am not famous and I live right across the street from the college.

But, I bought this Tam when I graduated and now I actually get to wear for something.

I would like to congratulate you, the Class of 2008.

And I congratulate your parents, relatives, and friends who are with us today. Being a parent is a tough job; it certainly is not for the faint of heart.

Frederick Buechner is a Presbyterian Minister and author. Folks like me quote him quite often because he writes and says the clever things that I wish I could say but can't for the lack wit.

Well Buechner writes, *If preachers decide to preach about hope, let them preach out of what they themselves hope for.*

You see, *The trouble with many sermons is not so much that the preachers are out of touch with what is going on in the world or in books or in theology but that they are out of touch with what is going on their own lives and in the lives of the people they are preaching to. ... let them speak out of the living truth of their own experience Let them have the courage to be themselves.*

Well, I think that is exactly what is going on in the well-known Ezekiel passage today: Ezekiel is preaching out of what he hopes for in the world.

Ezekiel is actually a priest who is carted off with the other prisoners from Jerusalem into exile into to Babylon. While in exile he makes a shift from priest to prophet.

Ezekiel was an odd sort of fellow—prophets normally are.

He sees strange thing; he sees living creatures with four faces and four wings with some type of crystal-dome hovering over their heads.

In my mind, Ezekiel could easily make the shift from prophet to Liberal Arts professor.

While he might like to write and do research, he's much more interested in getting his message across to his students, his people: the exiles who want to go back home.

To get his message across to his compatriots in exile, he not only preaches his prophecies—that's a little too boring for Ezekiel—he's too avant-garde for that; he also adds a little prophetic theatre into his repertoire.

He builds a miniature representation of Jerusalem and walls and ramps, and battering rams, and iron walls against it and then he lays down on his left side in front of this little play set for three hundred and ninety days to show the number of the years of their punishment.

Then he turns over on his right side for forty days to show the number of years of punishment for Judah.

He carries a backpack and digs a hole in the wall of his home and crawls out to show that Israel was a rebellious house and would be taken into exile.

Ezekiel is odd. But, to be sure, he did know that his people were in a hopeless situation.

God's people, Israel, had made a mess of things; they were devoured by Babylon, carted away from the place God had set up for them.

Their political and military defeat seemed like an irrevocable historical judgment. Nothing could pry loose Babylon's tight grip on throat of God's people.

Now the exiles were taken from their land, their temple destroyed, their sacrifices—everything that made them a people with a unique identity were gone.

Captivity had sapped all their hope. They were as good as dried up bones deteriorating under the hot sun.

There was no hope.

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

So one day in the midst of this hopelessness the Spirit of the Lord grabbed hold of the prophet Ezekiel, took him to a valley filled with a bunch of dust ol' bones, and asked the difficult questions that God often is known to ask:
Can these bones live?

The fact that you are graduating gives me a pretty good idea that you know how to answer test questions. Tests are not just about mastering the information; it is also mastering the test of the one who distributes the information. You have learned how to give the answer you are supposed to give.

Ezekiel knows that he's supposed to "Why, of course God. Of, course these bones can live."

But, in the midst of dusty death and a bunch of ol' dried up bones, Ezekiel can't bring himself to simply regurgitate the answer that he knows the professor wants to hear. Instead, he's diplomatic: "Ah shucks, God, you know the answer."

Then the Lord tells Ezekiel to do something ridiculous: preach. Preach to a bunch of dusty ol' bones.

Preach this message to this bunch of dusty ol' bones: *"O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live . . . And you shall know that I am the Lord."*

How foolish this must have looked to the neighbors—just plain silly.

The preacher is out preaching to a pile of old bones."

"He's crazy."

But there he was the preacher Ezekiel standing in the middle of a pile of dead bones telling them not to give up hope.

Yet, strange thing, he began to preach and what do you know, the breath that could only be the breath of God came into them, and they came to life, standing to their feet.

All those dried up bones, all hope lost, cut off completely from their home. They were not where they wanted to be, or where they were supposed to be.

But, the Spirit of the Lord filled them and they were alive!

If I am not mistaken, this is one of the first instances of a resurrection metaphor in scripture.

But, Ezekiel is not depicting the afterlife or resurrection of the dead here; this is a vision of hope for the renewal of the people Israel. God would open their graves and bring them back to the land of Israel. This was a message of hope here and now.

It is a miracle that only God can perform. In a time of unraveling hope, God asserts the unthinkable, calling the people to new hope, not grounded in the past but in the sheer faith that God is about to do the impossible. And impossible it was.

No one could survive the Babylonian experience without assimilation into that culture.

Yet God literally resurrected this people and brought them back home.

From hopelessness to hope, the unimaginable is imagined, new possibilities from the impossible.

Babylon, the uncontested empire, fell within 50 years. Israel did go home. The temple was rebuilt. //

Walter Brueggeman declares that in faith, we dare not absolutize the present. Don't bank on today because it will not last. Hope in Christ is hope that tomorrow brings new life. Hope is revolutionary.

God's hope is not wishful thinking; God's hope reminds us that today is **not** the final word; the breath of God is revolutionary and can always breathe new life into our lives.

Allowing such hope to grow within us is no easy task.

Maggi Dawn recently wrote an article for Christian Century Magazine where she reflected on a time when she was in a theology class:

I asked one of my professors how it was possible for faith to survive ...intense intellectual scrutiny. He thought for a while, then said, "Once upon a time I believed in a great many things. Now I believe only in a few things, but I believe in them more deeply than I ever thought possible. That God exists, that God is love, and that Jesus is the son of God—these things I believe. Everything else is up for debate."

In your time here at St. Andrews' I suspect that the professors have challenged your beliefs. I hope that they rattled your cages. But as you walk away from here I hope that you believe in certain things more deeply. One thing that I desperately desire for you to believe in deeply is hope.

One of my favorite parts of National Public Radio is This I Believe. In this I Believe project, people from all walks of life read on the NPR broadcast the core values that guide their daily lives. It is quite profound.

If I ever submitted an essay to I Believe with you folks in mind, it would go something like:

I believe that the core value that guides the daily life of the church is Ezekiel's dry bones vision. It encapsulates the faith in God that the church should aspire to live and proclaim.

I believe that if I had to distill the faith of the church into one word it would be hope—not wishful thinking, but hope.

I believe that God's hope is still at work in the malaise of our day today—no matter how hopeless it might seem at times.

While we see dusty hopelessness, I believe that God always makes room for hope. Not wishful thinking, but hope that brings us back to life. Hope that does not bank on today but looks to God's tomorrow.

I believe that this hope calls for us to do ridiculous things. It calls for us to continue to reach out to places like the West Bank, Sudan, Darfur, and other desperate places of the world where hope seems like nothing more than dusty dry bones out in a field.

I believe God's hope calls for us to do silly things like continue to proclaim hope when everyone else says it's a waste of time.

I believe this hope calls for us to do absurd things like continue to believe that preaching to dead bones will make a difference.

I believe that God's spirit is still in the habit of opening graves, breathing new life into the hopeless situations of our world, our families, and our own very lives.

I believe that each one of you in this class, no matter your degree, or your intended profession, is called to be a part of this absurdity of proclaiming hope in the hopeless corner of your world.

This I believe.

I hope you believe it too.

Amen.