

Worship Outline with Texts
Ghost Stories 1: The Walking Bones
July 12, 2020

Countdown (10 minutes)

Ghost-y stuff, info about worship, welcome, etc.

Opening Verse Genesis 2:7 (CEB) (Barb C)

The Lord God formed the human from the topsoil of the fertile land and blew life's breath into his nostrils. The human came to life.

Prelude

Allegro Vivace by Handel

Welcome (Rachael)

Opening Prayer (Barb C)

God, we thank you for summer and for the feeling of the sun on our faces. As the days are long and lasting, so your love for us is endless, full of possibilities. Awaken us, as you have awakened all that grows around us, to your light and your love. We turn our faces to you, following your way of light and love. May our worship honor you, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Offering and Prayer (Rachael for the series)

Holy God, your generosity overflows in our lives. Make us your hands and feet in our communities as we follow you and build your kingdom of justice and peace for all people. Bless these gifts that we offer to our church, and multiply them in service to you and to others. We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Song *Soon and Very Soon* (Men's Quartet)

Andraé Crouch

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Soon and very soon
We are going to see the king
Soon and very soon
We are going to see the king
Soon and very soon
We are going to see the king
Hallelujah, hallelujah
We're going to see the king

Soon and very soon

We are going to see the king
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Hallelujah, hallelujah
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Scripture (paraphrased to ghost story style)

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (Rachael's paraphrase)

One night, Ezekiel had a vision. It was so real, it was like it was really happening.

Suddenly, he felt someone touching him. He was all alone.

The hand of the Lord was on him, and then before he knew it, the Spirit of God had transported Ezekiel to the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. Every direction, for as far as he could see: human bones. God led him back and forth, walking around all those bones, and the closer he got to them, the more he could see how old and dry they were. There were so many, more than he could count.

Then God spoke to him and asked, "Ezekiel, can these bones be brought back to life?"

Ezekiel said, "I don't think I'm qualified to answer that question, God. You're the only one who could know."

Then God said to Ezekiel, "Call out to these bones and tell them to listen to God's voice. Tell them to listen and hear."

So Ezekiel shouted out, "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! God will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. God will attach tendons to you and muscles and fat will come upon you and God will cover you with skin. Then God will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know who God is."

And as Ezekiel began to shout, there was a noise, a rattling sound. The bones began to shake and move, and one by one the bones came together, bone to bone. Ezekiel watched, stunned, as he saw tendons and muscles and fat appear on them and skin cover them, but there was no breath in them. They were no longer dry, dead bones. But they were also not alive.

Then God told Ezekiel it was time to give these undead bodies breath and life. So Ezekiel shouted into the sky, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these bodies, these victims of war and struggle. Bring them to life!

And as Ezekiel looked on, the winds came and breath entered the many bodies in front of him and he watched as they came to life and stood up on their feet like a massive army.

Then God told Ezekiel, “These bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Now it’s time for you to speak to them. Tell them that just like I have done here, I will bring the people of Israel back to the land of Israel. They will know who God is, and with the breath of my Spirit in them, they will live again.

Sermon (Laura)

Today we begin a new series called Ghost Stories Volume II. In this series we will be exploring some spooky or scary stories from the Bible and what these stories tell us about living as Christians in today’s world.

Today’s Ghost Story comes from the Old Testament book of Ezekiel. And it is important to understand some key details that will help us understand this story a little bit more. Ezekiel was a prophet that prophesied about the destruction of Israel and the hopeful return to Israel. In the time that Ezekiel lived the people of Israel were exiled to Babylon, and resulted in a time of pain and hopelessness on the part of the Israelites. They were conquered by the Babylonians and were forced to live in a foreign land. It was unknown if and when they could return to their homeland, and if they could ever get back to the way things used to be when they were thriving as a people. It was not fair, they did not deserve to be conquered, they did not deserve to be forced from their land and made to adapt to living in a foreign place. However, the Israelites are not without blame for their current predicament. Ezekiel was tasked with prophesying to a rebellious nation of Israel. Israel’s behavior was not merely a phase in their history, but rather a deliberate rebellion against YHWH. This was a rebellion that spanned generations, and they had become set in their ways.

Ezekiel has the difficult task of speaking to a people that has lost hope, turned away from God, and are experiencing the consequences of their rebellion. Ezekiel uses imagery and metaphors that are dramatic, bizarre and even a little scary at times. The Israelites need to hear a message that disrupts the damaging pattern they find themselves in generation after generation.

The valley of dry bones is an appropriate metaphor for the people of Israel. Their actions have brought them to a place of desolation and death. The valley is FULL of bones. The dry bones represent a people whose sins and poor choices have been happening for a long time. The death and decay did not start yesterday, it started long ago. Long enough for metaphoric bodies to decay so long that what is left is dry bones bleached white by the harsh conditions in the valley. This is a valley of death, a valley of destruction. If the Israelites thought there was any way to salvage anything from their poor choices, this passage says otherwise. How do you bring life to a pile of bones that has not seen life for a long time? God even asks Ezekiel about this- “can these bones live, Ezekiel?” Well duh, I think we are way past that God, these bones have

not seen life in quite a long time, perhaps the logical thing to do would be to bury the bones and try to figure out how to start something new. In the beginning of the story today, it seems that the people of Israel are too far gone. The death of this chosen nation seems all but a forgone conclusion. It is time to start writing the funeral eulogy for the nation of Israel. Time of death was long ago, they were too foolish to notice.

God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones that they will live. God will cause flesh to come on the bones and breath will enter so that the bones may live. And that begins to happen to the bones, flesh forms on the bones. I imagine at this point the bodies resemble zombies because there is no breath in the bodies yet. They are not fully alive. From a distance it may appear that these bones are alive, but upon closer inspection these zombies are nearer to death than to life.

And this part is so important for us to grasp. Do not be deceived by the things we think have been brought back to life that were once dead. It is all too easy to dress up the things that have died long ago and try to convince ourselves and others that it is now alive and full of life. Because we want so desperately to distance ourselves from death and pain that we would rather pretend that what stinks of death is actually full of life. We cling to belief systems that only bring death to us and our neighbors. It is all too easy to pretend that a relationship is still viable instead of admitting that our actions caused the death of the relationship. It is all too easy to cling to things that we hold dear and not notice the stench of decay. In the valley of bones you can only pretend for so long before you open your eyes and notice that death is all around. We thought we were the chosen people, but through our actions and disobedience we have brought forth death and suffering.

But let me remind you friends that this would be the stopping point in a story of a people not chosen by God. No, the funeral eulogy that should be written is the eulogy for the death that thought it had a hold on Israel. God is up to something sneaky and brilliant, even if the Israelites don't deserve it. God tells Ezekiel that "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live!" God will breathe life into the pile of bones that was once dead. There is hope! And this is the kind of hope that is real. Real hope does not come without death. Death is in the foreground of this story not to celebrate death and make fun of the foolish Israelites, but to show the resilient power of life and hope that is found in God. Resurrection does not happen without death. So if you are wanting resurrection and new life without having death too, what you are seeking is not life. It may look like life, it may appear like it. But it is the same as saying that a zombie is actually alive.

And I know what some of you are thinking, that does not sound fun. We are trying to avoid death, pain, and discomfort. That is why I am a Christian, so I have an easy life free of death and discomfort. And this at its core is a false hope. Rev. Dr. Luke Powery in his book 'Dem Dry Bones' says that this version of hope erases death. "This, in fact, is not hope at all, because Christianity hope is not hope without death. Real hope is discovered in the midst of death, created on the anvil of adversity." We can't speak of resurrection if we can't even admit that we

have died. God can't breathe life in the things that have long died if we are in denial that it was dead to begin with.

And when I speak of death, I mean it figuratively. I am not worried about folks dragging around a dead body trying to pass it off as alive. I am instead referring to our souls, our systems, our beliefs. As John Wesley would often open a small group meeting, how is it with your soul? Really? Is your soul burdened with the atrophy of chasing after things we thought was life giving, but it only meant further decay. Is your soul alive with the breath that comes from the Holy Spirit?

The potential pitfall is thinking that some things are worth bringing back from the dead. Resurrection should not happen to all things that have died. Some things are best left alone. Even after something has died we foolish people try to resurrect it because that thing felt comforting or played into our sinful nature. We prioritize property over human life. Chasing the almighty dollar trumps the thriving of humanity. Equality feels like a threat instead of a blessing. Personal autonomy is prioritized over keeping people safe from the CoronaVirus. Are we any different than Israel? Has humanity learned anything new? Resurrection has been replaced with reanimating humanity's worst sins and mistakes. And do not be fooled, God does not bless this nor orchestrate this. We can dress it up to look like it is of God, wrap sinfulness in fancy wrapping and spray it with sweet perfumes. But that only masks the stench of death for so long. Do not call on the Holy Spirit to breathe life into things that should remain dead or should die off.

Christians should be testifying to the possibility of hope in a world that is mired with oppression, evil, and sin. And part of doing this work is being attuned to the counter cultural message of the Gospel. The message that death does not have the final answer and that the Holy Spirit breathes new life into the things that have been dealt a death blow by sin. Ezekiel was not called into a place filled with rainbows and unicorns. God called him into a desolate place where death was all around. God brought him into a place of danger, and told him to prophesy that death does not have the final word. He testified to the possibility of new life even when death was all around. Ezekiel testified to the hope that comes through God. Hope rises up when death is not fixated upon and viewed as the end of the story, but rather death is viewed in light of the presence of an active God who makes the impossible possible. The hope that is found in God does not make the road smoother or less bumpy. Being a follower of God does not mean that death and pain are a distant memory. Instead being a follower of God means being called into places of death and destruction to testify that new life is possible. Sometimes we are called to the valley of death so that we can be used by God to remind the hopeless that resurrection is possible when the Holy Spirit breathes new life into the places we thought were too far gone. If all hope was lost, God would have given up on Israel way back when Ezekiel was living. God has not given up on us just yet. God is not finished with us just yet, there is still hope for the hopeless.

The resurrection we hope for is not always immediate. Regrowth of dry bones takes time. Sometimes we have to stay in the valley of bones for a long time, believing that life is coming,

not now but soon. And just because resurrection happens for you personally, does not mean that it is time to pack your bags and get out of dodge. There are many bones in this valley, and thus there is a communal need for us to leave no one behind. Just because you have new life does not mean that you can disregard the humans still waiting for resurrection experiencing pain and oppression. And I know it is hard to live in the discomfort and pain, it gets old after awhile. But living out the Gospel is not easy, it is uncomfortable and disorienting. Living among the sick and dead requires a Jesus life attitude to see through the discomfort and see people made in the image of God deserving to thrive no matter what- no matter if they look different from us, live in a different neighborhood, live in a different country, have physical disabilities...NO MATTER WHAT. I echo UMC Anoka's inclusion statement that God's love is for everyone. Period. NO ifs and or buts about it. Is it easy? No, because to live as if God's love is for everyone requires us to give up our comfort and learn to sacrifice so that all can thrive. The promise of Ekekiel 37:14 is this: that God will put God's spirit in you, and you shall LIVE! And you shall know that God has spoken and this will happen. Resurrection is coming, friends. The question is, will you be there in the valley of bones to see it happen? Amen.

Benediction: Even in the midst of the valley of death, God is at work breathing life into the things that had died. May each of you grow into the calling to be speakers of truth that death does not have the final answer and the new life is available to everyone...no matter what.

Song *Ain't No Grave (U Can Jug or Nots)*
Claude Ely, 1934

Ain't no grave can hold my body down
There ain't no grave can hold my body down
When I hear that trumpet sound
Gonna rise right outta the ground
There ain't no grave can hold my body down

Well look down yonder Gabriel
Put your feet on the land and sea
But Gabriel don't you blow your trumpet
until you hear from me
Oh look way down the river
And what do you think I see
I see a band of angels and they're comin' after me

Ain't no grave can hold my body down
There ain't no grave can hold my body down
When I hear that trumpet sound
Gonna rise right outta the ground
There ain't no grave can hold my body down

Well meet me Jesus meet me
Meet me in the air
And if these wings don't fail me
I will meet you anywhere.

I going down to the river Jordan
And bury my knees in the sand
I'm gonna holler high Hosanna til I see the promised land

Ain't no grave can hold my body down
There ain't no grave can hold my body down
When I hear that trumpet sound
Gonna rise right outta the ground
There ain't no grave can hold my body down

When I hear that trumpet sound
Gonna rise right outta the ground
There ain't no grave can hold my body down

Prayers (Rachael)

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O God, who always listens to us,
who breathes new life into us,
call us forward to resurrection.

We want to live.
We thank you for the life you breathe into us,
and for each joy we experience.
This morning, we give thanks.
For what do God's people give thanks?

Silence

O God, who always listens to us,
who breathes new life into us,
call us forward to resurrection.

We are surrounded people unable to see your life past their tears.
We pray for this world in need of your healing presence:
for those who are imprisoned or alone,
those ill or infirm, or grieving, for those giving care and serving our communities.

For whom do God's people pray?

Silence

O God, who always listens to us,
who breathes new life into us,
call us forward to resurrection.

We are spellbound by those dry bones,
terrified of death,
and often too shocked to call forth life in your name.
We pray for your chosen people, your Church . . .
We pray for the courage not just to follow you to death,
but to follow you to the New Creation.

Call us to follow in the footsteps of your Son,
Jesus Christ, our Savior,
who taught us when we pray to say:

The Lord's Prayer (Congregation with image(s))

Song

Be Thou My Vision UMH 451, vs 1-2
Byrne, Hull, Young copyright 1963, Abingdon Press

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Naught be all else to me, save that thou art;
Thou my best thought, by day or by night,
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

2. Be thou my Wisdom, and thou my true Word;
I ever with thee and thou with me, Lord;
Thou my great Father, and I thy true son,
Thou in me dwelling, and I with thee one.

Benediction (Laura)

Postlude

Allegretto by Haydn arr. Bliss

