

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

March 26, 2023 (5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent, Year A)  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Psalm 130

Things are NOT always as they appear. The Lord said to Ezekiel, "These BONES are the whole house of Israel." The people of Israel had been taken from their homeland, but they had SURVIVED their exile; they were still alive. But things were NOT as they appeared.

In his vision, Ezekiel saw Israel as it REALLY was. The people in exile were cut off from hope and cut off from God: They were ALIVE PHYSICALLY, but, SPIRITUALLY, they were dead. They complained, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost" (v. 11). They'd lost EVERYTHING. Everything they'd ever KNOWN was GONE. They weren't just dead; their bones were DRY, like they'd baked in the sun. They were LONG dead, DEAD dead, VERY dead, EXTREMELY dead. There was no hope of EVER coming back. They was no hope.

Ezekiel sees the WORLD as it really is too. PAUSE for a moment the next time you're in some public place, when you're around a lot of people. Sometime, when you're at a store, or a restaurant., TAKE a moment and watch people's eyes. What do you SEE there? When you look into people's eyes, do you see life; do you see joy? Unfortunately, MOST of the time, no. USUALLY, you see anxiety, sadness, anger or DESPERATION. There's this tremendous sense of EMPTINESS in the world today. People are SEARCHING for something to BELIEVE in. They're looking for some MEANING in life, some REASON to go on. You see, the world we LIVE in is like the valley of dry bones: It's full of people who exist, but in truth they're spiritually dead.

Ezekiel sees US as we really are too. Who among us hasn't stood on the edge of losing all hope? We ALL hurt. We ALL have moments of weakness. We join the psalmist in crying, "Out of the depths I cry to you."

That Psalm goes far deeper into our sorrows than a bout of the blues or a bad day. For many folks, the pit is so deep and dark that they can't climb out. All they can see is the WALLS of their despair. It's an overwhelming sense that life is hopeless.

That's how I felt when I was in high school: "Out of the depths I cry to you."

I want to share something deeply personal with you today. I've been your pastor for 3 ½ years now, so I feel like it's time that you heard my story. I've shared before that I haven't always been a Lutheran, or even a Christian. Now, let me explain WHY. And HOW that CHANGED.

You see, religion wasn't a part of my early childhood. My dad was in the army, and the military moved us around a lot, and my parents never found a church they were comfortable with. I was NEVER BAPTIZED or CONFIRMED. My parents followed the way of thinking that you shouldn't teach a CERTAIN faith to children, so they can decide for THEMSELVES when they grow up. What THAT meant was that I didn't learn ANYTHING about God. We didn't pray or read the Bible or go to church or ANYTHING, so I knew ABSOLUTELY NOTHING about faith.

When my dad was discharged, and we finally settled down in the town I grew up in, my parents decided I WAS old enough to decide for myself. They took me to Sunday school one day, and when I heard a Bible story for the first time, I had a lot of questions. But the Sunday school teacher said, "YOU are NOT ALLOWED to ask questions about GOD!" (By the way, don't EVER make a child feel like God won't TOLERATE QUESTIONS. Because I decided at that moment that any God that couldn't HANDLE the questions of little KID wasn't the kind of God I needed.) And it didn't seem to MATTER to my FAMILY ANYWAY. And so, I DID decide for myself. I was out. I was done. I gave up on God. I stopped believing in God altogether. I became an atheist.

And I was a REALLY STRONG atheist. I was a SMART kid and I could argue AGAINST the EXISTENCE of God with anyone. I guess it came up a lot, because this is what my school classmates

REMEMBER about me. I was the atheist of the class. But what they COULDN'T SEE back then was the REASON was so ANGRY, the PAIN that I was HIDING. Having no faith in God was the WORST thing that could happen to me. I lost all hope. I was spiritually dead.

You see, as a kid, I was EXTREMELY LARGE and AWKWARD. (You wouldn't know that by looking at me now, right?) I was as tall as my second-grade teacher. (Yes, she was REALLY SHORT, but I was HUGE.) I was SO big that I received special physical education in elementary school to help me with my coordination. I was already THIS tall in the 5<sup>TH</sup> GRADE. I ALSO wore REALLY thick glasses. You can guess what THAT meant. I was the victim of a great deal of bullying. And as you might expect, I developed EXTREMELY LOW self-esteem, as well as a lot of anger.

My first DEFENSE was to USE my BEST ASSET, my size and strength – I made my tormenters REGRET their words. But I got in TROUBLE for that. My parents were called in to the school, and I was warned REPEATEDLY NOT to FIGHT BACK, because, with the SIZE difference, I could really HURT someone.

So, with NO way to DEFEND myself, I just had to TAKE it. I may have LOOKED like a monster, but I was just a KID. That PAIN had to go SOMEWHERE, so I turned the anger INWARD, and I started to BELIEVE their words. And I began to HATE MYSELF.

When I went to high school, I was blessed to find some friends who were TRULY GOOD people. They were CHRISTIANS, and they were filled with an UNCONDITIONAL kind of love. They were so open and accepting that it brought out the BEST in everyone around them. They inspired me. They didn't think anything of it, because they were just LIVING their FAITH. And God USED my friends to plant a seed in my heart.

MOST of them were LUTHERAN. And to my ASTONISHMENT, they INVITED me to come with them to YOUTH group. WHY would they DO that? They KNEW I still didn't BELIEVE in God. But that didn't seem to MATTER to them. They just LOVED me ANYWAY, so I went along to be with THEM. But it was OBVIOUS that THEY had something that I DIDN'T.

On the surface, everything was going GREAT for me. I had a close group of friends. I was doing extremely well ACADEMICALLY AND ATHLETICALLY. I was on the WAY to becoming my class valedictorian and an All-Conference football player.

But EMOTIONALLY, something very DARK was happening. I was a sophomore, and I was falling apart. Even though I was SURROUNDED by people who cared for me, I FELT isolated and alone. It didn't make any SENSE. I had EVERYTHING GOING for me. I SHOULD have been happy. But none of it mattered. I STILL HATED myself. I couldn't even look at myself in the mirror.

Over the course of several months, I rode the VICIOUS CYCLE OF DEPRESSION ALL the way down. I hit rock bottom. I felt SO EMPTY. I gave up. I wanted it to end. I wanted to DIE. I was Suicidal; I was LOOKING for a way to KILL myself. I had NO hope.

But THAT NIGHT, when I had NOTHING LEFT, God reminded me where I'd SEEN HOPE – in my FRIENDS. What did THEY have that I DIDN'T? They had God.

And at that moment, I stopped looking down at the FLOOR of the PIT OF MY DESPAIR, and I looked UP. And I found that God was RIGHT THERE, REACHING DOWN for me – that he'd ALWAYS been there. THAT was the night I BECAME a CHRISTIAN.

Words can't describe the EXPERIENCE of being GIVEN HOPE when you HAD NONE, of finding MEANING in life when there WASN'T any. Words can't do it JUSTICE. RECEIVING HOPE is like being given a NEW LIFE, REBORN. That's why I SAY that I'm a BORN-AGAIN CHRISTIAN.

But how I WISH I WASN'T. I KNOW that my experience has SHAPED who I am as a PASTOR and as a PERSON. It's WHY I'm so conscious of how we, as a church, LOOK to an OUTSIDER, to someone who's never BEEN to this church, or ANY church before – because that was ME once. And it's why I talk so MUCH about making EVERYONE feel WELCOME, NO EXCEPTIONS – because an INVITATION LITERALLY SAVED my life. And it's why I'm so PASSIONATE about getting YOUTH ministry RIGHT.

I know God has USED where I CAME from to MAKE me WHO I AM, but, as I said a couple weeks ago, how I WISH I could have NOT ENDURED that PAIN. What I would GIVE to TRADE my

ALONE-NESS for the LIFE-LONG LOVE of God that most of you have ALWAYS known, the ABIDING faith that you have ALWAYS had. What a gift that is.

YOU KNOW that GOD GIVES LIFE. That's what EZEKIEL'S VISION is ABOUT. No matter how low we've sunk, no matter how alone and empty we feel, God offers us the hope of new life. Ezekiel's vision gives us an EXTRAORDINARY INSIGHT into the life-giving grace of God. To a people whose life seemed to be OVER, a declaration of NEW life was made. To those whose existence seemed like a LIVING DEATH, NEW HOPE was GIVEN.

If God can make Ezekiel's dry bones RATTLE back together and return to life, God can resurrect US too.

And if God could put ME back together, when I'd GIVEN UP, then God can do that for ANYONE.

And if God can put our LIVES back together when they're falling apart, then we can hold ON for one more day, and face our future with courage and faith.

And if God can give us a NEW START and a RESTORED LIFE, then we have EVERY REASON to hope.

In the beginning, God formed us from the dust and BREATHED the Spirit of life INTO us. Brothers and sisters, God NEVER STOPPED. God CONTINUES to RESHAPE us in God's image, and give us NEW life. God NEVER ABANDONS us.

Even when we're SPIRITUALLY DEAD, there's HOPE. There's ALWAYS HOPE. Amen.