

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, 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.'

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. 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. Then 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.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

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 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. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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.'

Romans 8:22-27

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

The Word of the Lord...

While down in Austin, Texas earlier this month I met Ted Wardlaw. That name may not mean much to you, but especially in southern Presbyterian circles he is fairly well known. He did serve at one of the largest churches in the Atlanta area and now serves as President of Austin Theological Seminary.

During our conversation with him we were discussing the challenge of balancing church and family. I shared with him my own mantra which is: *Thou shalt not sacrifice thy family on the altar of the perfect sermon.*

He admitted to us that he had at times struggled with that and had also struggled with one his wife liked to remind him of: *Thou shalt not embarrass thy children.* In general this meant sermons but occasionally it applied to other situations as well. One story in particular cracked us up where he admitted that on the night that his daughter was going out on her first date with someone from her youth group, the pale and shy young man came to the door and entered the living room. After a few minutes of awkward conversation the young couple got up to leave and as they headed out the door Dr. Wardlaw cried out to them, "Remember your baptism!"

He said his wife just shook her head at him and said, "Feel better?"

It is Pentecost and a day for red and fire and the speaking and understanding of many languages and dry bones connected to the other bones and yet I chose Romans 8 to read this morning. Why? Because I thought it was important to interrupt the mainstream culture's message of a dying church with God's word of hope.

Sadly, it is not just those on the outside who are projecting our demise but some in our very pews who spread worry and fear that the church is immanently dying, dead already, apostate or has lost its way. I strongly believe that having a vast array of theological viewpoints makes us stronger and prepares us for the Kingdom where people of all theological stripes will gather at the table; but excluding people and proclaiming the imminent death of the church is also causing harm and damage.

Today the confirmation class will remember their baptism as they will confirm their standing in the faith and commit to the vows that were spoken at their baptism. And so to all of us I say, "Remember your baptism!" and I also say, "Remember the resurrection!"

⁴We are resurrection people. Death has lost ultimate power. Death no longer has dominion over our lives, both individually and corporately. Even if the church were to die, we believe in resurrection; that she would come back altered and renewed. People give all sorts of reasons for the dying, but they are not afraid at all to proclaim the dying nature of the church. And I want to know, where is the hope as found in Romans 8.24? The church groans, sure, but right next to the groaning is hope.

It feels an awful lot like language of people who don't know the Easter story.

It feels like people who don't understand that death never has the last word; that God gets the last word, and God's word is *never* death, but grace, and love.

It feels like the language of nostalgia, which understands that God was working in the past, but leaves no room for the living God to be doing a wonderful new thing. And the language of death has no place in the context of Easter people!

Every morning is Easter morning!

This is not to say we should put our heads in the sand, or just say that everything is going just dandy, all we hit was a little iceberg, no biggie captain. We need to be open and honest about what is going on.

But here's the thing. I don't spend my time in a congregation that is dying. The services in the church I go to are full of new members, confirmands and baptisms. I spend my time in a congregation that is spreading the love of God to all parts of the world, certainly in Mechanicsburg, but also in Malawai, Lithuania, Mexico and Honduras. We feed the hungry and care for the homeless through the money given and the sweat poured out at ministries such as Downtown Daily Bread and New Hope Ministries. We are active in Habitat for Humanity and have two mission trips going out this summer.

I spend my time in a congregation that is dancing in the life and light of God, and quite frankly can't answer questions about the dying church, cause I don't know what that looks like and I don't have time for hopeless drivel.

What we do here and what we do out there matters. It is nothing less than God's charge, and it is nothing less than God's plan. And I for one am sick and tired of hearing death language used about it.

Where is faith?

Where is the memory of Easter?

As we celebrate the end of the Easter season, let us not forget our baptism.

Let us not forget resurrection.

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35, 37-39).

As individuals and as the church we must speak up!
Some call it missional.
Some call it emergent.
I call it being Church.

And we ain't dead yet!

In the Name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit – Amen.

¹ This sermon is heavily influenced by a paper written by the Reverend Dr. Matt Fry for The Well. *In Hope*. Pentecost 31, May 2009. Austin, TX.