

## “Will These Bones Live?”

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1–14 and Ephesians 2:1–10  
Rev. Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lapsley



First Presbyterian  
Church of Charlotte

January 11, 2026

Good morning! I bring you greetings from Union Presbyterian Seminary where we form leaders of gospel-inspired transformative change in pursuit of a more just and compassionate world. You may be surprised to learn that Union currently provides more ordained clergy to PCUSA congregations than any other seminary--we take our mission to serve the church very seriously. But we are not just about educating people heading for ordination. We have many programs for folks who simply want to learn more, people like you, who want to connect their faith to the world in which we live. So I invite you to check out the variety of Union's offerings, including our Pathways programs for lay people.

The reading from the Old Testament is from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37. Listen for the Word of God:

**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. **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, will these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” **4** Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. **5** Thus says the Lord God to these 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, “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.” **10** I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

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<sup>11</sup> 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.’<sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup> 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.”

The Word of the Lord.

"Will These Bones Live?"

Chapter 37 of Ezekiel. The vision of the dry bones--the stirring image of life coming out of death. It's the prophet's best, most famous work.

So you'll understand why, when I was teaching Ezekiel, it was a source of frustration to my students when I told them they weren't allowed to read this passage. That, in fact, *no one* should read this passage. Unless. Unless they had spent a good, long time with what comes before it. One frigid January in an intensive course we spent three weeks with the book of Ezekiel. The first thirty-odd chapters of Ezekiel are pretty much unrelenting death, violence, loss, trauma, and grief. And truly bizarre symbolism. It's weird and it's wild and it's harrowing.

At the core of it all--all of the book up to the valley of dry bones--is the question of whether God is still God in the face of overwhelming disaster, whether faith matters.

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Does it matter? For the prophet Ezekiel you have to scrape the very bottom of things in order to suss that out. So our class spent over two weeks, about 8 hours a day with some of the most devastating texts in all of Scripture. It was what Psalm 23 memorably calls the "valley of the shadow of death." That January term the winter was beastly, the wind rattling the panes of our classroom windows, the barren landscape outside a fitting scene for our somber reflections.

Too many times, I told my students, people just read and preach the vision of new life, of bones rising, when they haven't spent time in the valley of the shadow. It's power cannot be fully understood without all that has gone before.

As a result, by the end of Week 2 the mood of our classroom was pretty morose. I want you to know that, in general, it's not actually my goal to depress my students. But it was helpful pedagogically that the mood in the classroom *did* reflect Ezekiel's mood. When we turned the page to chapter 37 at the beginning of Week 3 and saw Ezekiel's vision of dry bones and his question, "Will These Bones Live?" the general feeling was worthy of Eeyore the sad-sack donkey from Winnie the Pooh: maybe not, probably not.

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I'm less worried these days that we--us, those of us alive in 2026- that we haven't spent enough time in the valley of the shadow of death. A year or more of losses, griefs, and betrayals, felt in our communities; strain and brokenness in our families. In our churches. In our nation. And in our own souls. I'm not worried that we in 2026 haven't peered into suffering enough to appreciate Ezekiel's vision.

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"Will These Bones Live?" I dunno. Maybe not.

Ezekiel and his audience had been living in exile in Babylon for a long time--more than a generation. Long enough not to have much faith in their God anymore. In their minds their God had gotten smaller since they had been living in Babylon with its big, glitzy, macho gods. Babylon was a city that exuded success: huge monumental architecture, wealth, power, empire. The implication was clear: Babylonian gods take charge; they *win*. By contrast, the Israelites' own God, the God of their ancestors, seemed to be absent. And so powerless.

"Will These Bones Live?" Maybe. Kinda seems unlikely, though.

The challenge for Ezekiel is that the god of his people has become very small for them. The temple in Jerusalem—their God's own home—was destroyed. They had endured forced migration to an alien land. The people's sense of who God is, of what God is doing in the world, has become dry, as dry as the bones in that valley. "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost," they say.

"Will These Bones Live?" Maybe. Maybe not.

Amidst all this, Ezekiel, who is the weird and wild prophet of a wild God, has this wild vision: the sinews, the flesh, the bones. Life coming out of death. The Lord's

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resurrection of a vast multitude. Really?!? How? How can this be when our god is so small?

English translations fail at this point. They call the sound of bones coming together a "rattling." "a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone." One student in that January class said the rattling reminded him of the soft tap, tap, tapping of someone typing on a computer. I thought, you've been on screens too long if you think God's resurrection of a vast multitude sounds like a computer keyboard!

It is NOT a "rattling." The Hebrew word here is *ra'ash*, which means a thunderous shaking. The ancient Greek version translates it as a *seismos*, an earthquake. It recalls the thunderous *seismos* that shakes the foundations of the earth when Jesus breathes his last on the cross. It is the seismic sound of life coming out of death. A "rattling" is entirely too anemic.

"Will These Bones Live?" Maybe!

Like this congregation, the church where my husband, Greg, is currently the pastor has a food pantry. A woman named Sky has been coming to their food pantry regularly for about a year now. Would the church volunteers keep Sky at arms length, fending off too much involvement, even trouble, that might come from engaging her beyond giving her food? As Sky is both deaf and mute, it took some effort for the church volunteers to learn to communicate with her. She was living in her car and was unemployed. At one point she said she needed a place to park her car overnight sometimes. The church elders deliberated and then said she could park overnight in the church parking lot. At

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one point Sky was assaulted in the parking lot by someone she knew, and the police were called. The church was getting more involved, and it wasn't always easy.

### "Will These Bones Live?"

The great theologian of the Middle Ages, Meister Eckhart, was the Ezekiel of his day. Eckhart preached of a God at odds with the Unapproachable God of the established church. Eckhart spoke of the "Wild One," the God who endlessly surprises, who brings new life to death-haunted times and spaces. Eckhart's "Wild God" was too much for the church at the time, which, because he called out their god as puny and distant, condemned him.

The exiles in Babylon with Ezekiel were crippled by an imagination that thinks death is always death, an end, not a beginning. Certainly, the little God they had tamed could not do much about their dry bones. Their small, quiet god maybe helped them tinker a bit, cope a little with the harsh realities of the world. But Ezekiel held up for them a different vision. A vision where death became the occasion for new life. They rose as a vast multitude, transformed and animated by God's own breath, wind, spirit. The Hebrew is *ruach* and it means all of these things. God's own *ruach* blew in and through these people. This was and is an absurd vision. It defies all logic. How can Ezekiel make such a vision compelling to the withered imagination of his audience?

The Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann speaks of the prophetic task as precisely one of re-imagining. The task of prophetic imagination, he says, is to cut

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through the numbness, to penetrate the self-deception. So that the God of endings is confessed as Lord.

How does Ezekiel do this? He does not do it by rational argumentation, by appealing to their reason. He makes no explicit claims about the vision's plausibility. He does not request that the audience accept what he saw, and certainly he does not argue for the truth of the vision. He simply *shares* with them the vision that he saw, of what God is doing, making a new creation, forming a new people for God's mission in the world.

"When we were dead through our trespasses, God made us alive together with Christ." As Christians, our mission is to share this vision of God bringing new life out of death. This is the life into which Callahan, being baptized today, is called, along with each of us.

How do bones rise up? The church gathered around Sky. They got involved, they risked the trouble. And things changed. She has an apartment now, and has become a food pantry volunteer, helping others as she was once helped. On a recent day she was working at the pantry, swapping make-up tips with another volunteer. There are still hard days. But they live through them together. Sky is receiving much from the church, but the church is receiving even more. Because the Wild God cracked open their collective imagination to see sinews and flesh coming together, bones rising up, Sky's but also their own, animated by the Spirit of the Wild God of life.

Do you hear the sounds of sinews, flesh, bones coming together? Maybe it doesn't sound like an earthquake; maybe it *does* sound like the soft tap, tapping on a computer. Maybe the noises of this world are now so loud--the news, the screens, the screaming maw of the internet--maybe they are so loud that you have to tune out all the other

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noise, you have to listen more carefully for the sounds of new life that God is raising up all around us and in us.

A surprising number of young people are turning toward faith communities as places to meet the living God. Screens seem to be losing their allure, their addictive and stupefying effect on humans might be waning. There are signs that creativity in the arts and advances in research are advancing despite the forces that oppose them. Signs that the life of the mind in service to God is still a value worth upholding, a life worth living. There are signs that neighbors care for one another in spite of everything. Signs that Jesus followers are embodying the love of Christ for this whole beautiful, broken world as they point to the vision of the new life that the Wild God offers to all.

It is Epiphany, when we celebrate the light of Christ being revealed to and for and in the world. What is the light of Christ revealing here at First Pres? How is your collective imagination being cracked open? Where is life coming out of death? Do you hear the sounds of it?

The Christian life is not about tinkering, or even just coping, though sometimes we have to do that. It is not about worshiping a small, domestic god of our own making. It is about being opened to alternative worlds of the Wild God's own making. It is about a church that incarnates the love that pours out from that God. God is blowing spirit, breath, life onto our withered imaginations so that we may see and hear the sound of new life all around us.

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God breathed into them. And they lived, and they stood on their feet, a vast multitude.  
Do you hear it?