

Let's start off with a bit of historical data so I can provide some context for the words we hear from the prophet Ezekiel in the opening verses of chapter 37. Ezekiel lived about 600 years before the time of Jesus, some 2,600 years ago. He was born and raised in Jerusalem. Israel was one of the small countries that were located between the super powers of that day, namely Egypt and Babylon (which is modern day Iraq). When Egyptians and Babylonians were pre-occupied with other concerns Israel lived in relative tranquility and independence. But oftentimes Israel was just a vassal state under the control of either Egypt or Babylon.

Israel got in trouble when it made a poor assessment of the military/political situation in the region and demanded more independence than one of the super powers were willing to provide. This is exactly the situation that has occurred during the time of Ezekiel. Israel revolts against the oppressive rule of Babylon with the hope that Egypt will come to their defense in the process. The revolt is a total failure, Egypt does not aid them, and Nebuchadnezzar II, the ruler of Babylon, utterly destroys Jerusalem. According to the protocol of that era, Nebuchadnezzar II has all the elite leadership in Jerusalem deported back to Babylon so they can serve his needs and as they are absent in their homeland that cannot stir up another revolt. Ezekiel, an intellectual, priest, prophet, and political adviser, is among those exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon.

The words of the 37th chapter are written to his fellow exiles. They have been defeated, seen their capital city utterly destroyed, forced to leave their homes and possessions behind as they find themselves as servants in a foreign land. Ezekiel is among those who have lost it all and have no prospects for circumstances getting better. Bleak is their situation and outlook.

The words of scripture are inspired because they speak not only to the original listening audience, in this case the exiles in Babylon, but the words speak to every successive generation in similar circumstances. Therefore, the words of Ezekiel 37 are for you and me whenever our circumstances are bleak.

There are times in our lives when an accurate assessment of our situation is that we are in a valley of dry bones, that is, good possibilities are far-fetched at best. When God asks Ezekiel if these dry bones can live the prophet throws the question back in God's lap. Ezekiel is basically saying that he doesn't see how the dry bones can live but he is open to any insight God might have. That is what we need to do in bleak situations. Admit that we are clueless and ask God to help us move forward.

In recounting his vision, Ezekiel challenges his fellow exiles and generations to come to view their circumstances not through their own limited vision, but through God's eyes. Can these bones live? Look at them through God's eyes and watch the bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Such unanticipated results become reality throughout our Judeo-Christian history. Moses and Pharaoh, the children of Israel and the Red Sea, David and Goliath, Ruth and Boaz, the crucifixion and resurrection, Saul the persecutor turning into Paul the evangelist, race discrimination and Martin Luther King, Jr., South African apartheid and Bishop Tutu with Nelson Mandela. Dry bones turn into living bodies in unforeseen ways. Can these bones live? Look at them through God's eyes.

I love to tell the story of my parents because they, like so many persons born in the Depression era, overcame great odds. There were dry bones circumstances and new life results repeatedly during their lives. The story line features my father but my mother is present and indispensable in so many ways, although behind the scenes. This is the best illustration I have of what Ezekiel is trying to lift up with his vision of the valley of dry bones.

I have no aunts or uncles and therefore no cousins as my parents were each an only child. In addition, both my Mom and Dad lost a parent early in life. My Dad's mother died of pneumonia when he was 4. His Dad was a bus driver for Greyhound and therefore extended family helped raise him. My Mom's father died in a gun

accident when she was 6. Her Mom worked at manual labor jobs and therefore extended family helped raise her. Yet, they each got by okay throughout their school years. Therefore, early on in life they each experienced loss and they not only coped but overcame the attached challenges.

Early on my Dad decided he wanted to earn his income with his mind and not his muscle. As he graduated from High School he dreamed of attending Nebraska and pursuing a degree and career in journalism. His Dad and step-mother had no money to send him off to university so he enlisted in the Navy with the plan of saving money so he could go to college. During the year he spent in the Navy he would send most of each paycheck back home for savings.

After one year in the Navy he chose the option of serving in the Reserves and returned home. He now had the savings to start college and he planned on working his way through until he earned his degree. Only one problem. When he returned from the Navy he was informed by his father that the money he had sent home was needed and it had been spent. Period, end of conversation, and no reimbursement to be expected. That can leave one feeling bleak as if sitting in a valley of dry bones.

Dad did not go to college. Instead he found work at the Metropolitan Utilities District (M.U.D.) as a ditch digger. After a short while he found his way into the maintenance office. Over time he slowly rose in the ranks of M.U.D. By his late 30's he had risen to be Vice-President in charge of Marketing. The only step left at M.U.D. was President. But he clearly understood that the Board had a firm policy that their President had to have a college degree. He hit his own glass ceiling, if you remember the sermon I shared last week about Deborah and the Glass Ceiling. Here the glass ceiling was not gender or race but academic credentials. Attending college at that point did not seem to be a viable option since he had a full time job, wife, two boys, and mortgage. Stuck in his late 30's as Vice-President, knowing he had the ability to advance but not the opportunity. Twenty to thirty years in the same position did not seem inviting to him. That can leave one feeling bleak as if sitting in a valley of dry bones.

Can these bones live? The situation is bleak. But look at the situation through God's eyes and watch the bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Dad had served in various civic organizations over the years and had a large network of people he knew in town. One person in that network was the owner of a well-established real estate firm in Omaha. That real estate firm had just received a lucrative contract from Mutual of Omaha to develop Regency, an upscale area in west Omaha of office buildings, retail stores, a hotel, and a residential area.

The real estate firm had staff in place to care for the residential side of the development but they needed the right person to lead the commercial and retail aspects of the project. The president of the real estate company was talking with a bank president who was going to process all the funds needed for the Regency project. They were in the office of the bank president in downtown Omaha talking about who might be the right person to head up commercial/retail side of project. They just could not agree on the right person when my Dad walked by the window on the sidewalk. They looked at each other and said "Bob Shreve." The president of the real estate company caught my Dad on the sidewalk where they proceeded to talk for over an hour.

The dry bones came together and my Dad all of a sudden, out of the blue, found himself in a job that had limits only determined by his ability. Over the next thirty years he flourished in real estate development. He not only did well locally but he excelled as he became involved in the national organization for realtors. In 1989 he became the President of the National Association of Realtors. The guy without a college degree and bumping up against a glass ceiling in his late 30's found a new door open that resulted in unimaginable success.

Can these bones live? Look at the situation through God's eyes and watch the bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Bones come together in unanticipated ways. Guess where the National Association of Realtors office is located. A location my Dad had to travel to 3-4 per year from the mid-80's through the mid-90's. The office is located on Michigan Avenue in downtown Chicago. Guess who had grand-children being born in Chicago in the mid-80's. My Mom and Dad. That is, Marjorie and I had our son born in 1985 and our daughter born in

1986. Therefore, Mom came with Dad each time he “had to” travel to Chicago for business with the National Association of Realtors. Dem bones, amazing at times.

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Let’s get back to the Biblical story. When Ezekiel had his vision there was no apparent hope for the Israelites as they were in exile in Babylon. Their ancestors had been slaves in Egypt for 400 years. It looked like they might be exiles in Babylon long term as well. Then an unexpected development came to pass as a new power came on the scene.

It was the Persians with Cyrus as their leader. Cyrus, the Persian, conquered the Babylonians and then he extended his reign throughout the Middle East. He had the opposite philosophy from the Babylonians. He thought it was good that the small countries under his control had their own leadership and semi-independence. He was the Warren Buffet of conquering moguls. Therefore, Cyrus not only allowed the exiles to return to Israel but he and his successors provided the funding for them to rebuild their capital city, Jerusalem. That was an unimaginable change of events.

Dry bones live. That is the message of Ezekiel. It is the same message we see in the life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dry bones do live!