

Scripture Reading for November 7, 2021

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV)

¹ The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’ ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.” ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. ¹¹ Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophecy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’

John 4:19-26 (NIV)

¹⁹ “Sir,” the woman said, “I can see that you are a prophet. ²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you Jews claim that the place where we must worship is in Jerusalem.”

²¹ “Woman,” Jesus replied, “believe me, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²² You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, for salvation is from the Jews. ²³ Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴ God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.”

²⁵ The woman said, “I know that Messiah” (called Christ) “is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.”

²⁶ Then Jesus declared, “I, the one speaking to you—I am he.”

Sermon: “I Can’t Believe My Eyes”

John Lennon’s iconic song, *Imagine*, will no doubt be sung at various school assemblies this coming week. Its lyrics are well-known: “Imagine there’s no heaven; it’s easy if you try. No hell below us, above us only sky.” It goes on: “Imagine there’s no countries, it isn’t hard to do, nothing to kill or die for—and no religion too. Imagine all the people, living life in peace.” And the chorus continues: “You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one. I hope someday you’ll join us, and the world will be as one.”¹ This feel-good song, now 50 years old, is commonly regarded as a *peace* anthem. Yet its lyrics also speak against materialism, nationalism, sees the world as only in the here and now, and implies that religion is the reason for most wars. Certainly, religious differences have been a *huge* factor in violence and war. But that has been eclipsed by *secular*, nationalistic greed and political ideology during the last century. Blaming religion for all the world’s ills is sounding hollow, even to ardent atheists. Lennon’s utopian vision is a simplistic fantasy that doesn’t correspond to reality, but we will still wave candles in unison and live hoping against hope for a better tomorrow.² Our reading from Ezekiel is another vision of hope for the future. The image of “Dem bones” is well-known, but it is—frankly—bizarre and at first glance it doesn’t look at all like good news. Let’s explore it briefly this Remembrance Sunday.

Ezekiel, whose name means “God strengthens,” was priestly Judean exile, taken into captivity in 579 BC and based in an internment camp called Tel-Abib in Babylonia.³ He was God’s prophet to the exiles.⁴ Our reading this morning is the third of his four major visionary reports.⁵ We are told that God’s spirit transported Ezekiel in a vision and set him down in the middle of a valley that was full of bones.⁶ We are then told that God led Ezekiel “around them,” and this has a sense of around and around, time and time again, to have a good look at those bones in the valley. This is no mere glance on Ezekiel’s part, because it says he saw there “were very many and they were very dry.” The image is therefore one of a battlefield whose slain never received a proper burial but were left decay and be ravaged by birds and beasts where they fell.⁷ Ezekiel is astonished to see this multitude of disconnected and thoroughly desiccated bones. Death is a fact, it’s real, not an illusion. God says to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones

¹ Released 1971, after the Beatles broke up.

² Of course, we need to actively *work* for a better tomorrow. And that does require peace, mutual tolerance, and cooperation. The ongoing COP Summit in Glasgow is an example that transcends nationalism and religious beliefs.

³ See Ezek 3:15. His prophetic career stretched from 593 to at least 571 BC (Ezek 29:17). His followers edited and preserved his prophecies they were members of the line of priests known as the Zadokites. His older contemporary was Jeremiah. Ezekiel was married but his wife died the year Jerusalem fell to Babylon (24:15-19).

⁴ Note, the second wave of Jewish exiles arrived in 586 BC, following the destruction of Solomon’s Temple.

⁵ The others are in Ezek 1:1 - 3:15; 8:1 - 11:25, and 40:1 - 48:35.

⁶ Ezek 37:1. Despite the possibility of ritual contamination by contact with the dead, Num 19:16-18. Ezekiel is led in this trance through the field, and because it is a *vision*, the issue of cleanliness is irrelevant.

⁷ Scholars sought the source of Ezekiel’s imagery, both in Mesopotamian battle accounts and in treaty curses. There is mention of an Assyrian King Sennacherib (704-681 BC) who bragged that “the bodies of the enemy warriors filled the plain like grass.” If the vassals of the Assyrian King Esarhaddon (680-669 BC) were disloyal, they risked the following curse: “May the leader of the gods fill you with his fierce arrow and fill the plain with your corpses and give your flesh to the eagles and the vultures to feed upon.” Presumably the scavengers have long since completed their feast. All that is left is desiccated bones.

live?”⁸ The prophet’s response is vague: “Lord God, you know.” We don’t know where to place the emphasis; was it a bold response that affirms God already knows the answer (“God, *you* know”) or is it a hesitant pause “Lord God . . . you know”?⁹ Regardless, God then tells the prophet to prophesy *to the dry bones*. This sounds and is *ridiculous*—let’s not lose sight of that fact—as if *bones* had ears to hear! Nevertheless, prophet’s role was to be the mouthpiece of God, and their job was to speak God’s message *into* the situation, as we will see later.¹⁰ Whatever Ezekiel’s doubts, he proclaims the word of the LORD and says: “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.”¹¹ Note that this sequence *reverses* the process in which bodies decompose.

Ezekiel does what God commanded and suddenly there is a noise, a rattling, and the dry bones come together¹² and become bodies. But Ezekiel observed that the bodies are lifeless. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy again, this time to the divine spirit that he would breathe life into these dead bodies.¹³ And we are reminded of the creation story, where God’s spirit breathes life into Adam.¹⁴ Ezekiel couldn’t believe his eyes, the corpses become alive; “they stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”¹⁵ This weirdness is typical of eccentric Ezekiel yet what does it mean? Well, what it *doesn’t* mean is that this vision is the origin of the idea of the bodily resurrection of the dead. No, that emerged in Jewish thought some 400 hundred years later.¹⁶ In fact, God then explains to Ezekiel what this vision is all about: “Mortal, these bones are *the whole house of Israel*,” says God. “I have heard the despair of my people in exile who are lamenting that ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope has died; our life thread has been cut.’”¹⁷ God then tells Ezekiel to proclaim to the exiles that though are as good as dead, God will raise his people up and take them home to the land of Israel. God repeats himself: “I will place my spirit in you, and you will *live*; I will give you *rest* in *your own* land. Then you will know that I am the LORD—I have spoken, and I will act, declares the LORD.”¹⁸ God does not deny that the exiles deadly despair is real. Rather God describes, in both metaphorical and literal language, what will be done to transform their lives. God will bring them back home. And this reminds them of a new exodus. This vivid vision, then, is one of hope and intended to persuade his readers to accept a new perception of their reality, for God is about to act. If God can restore dried bones to life, then God’s saving power is not to be underestimated.

⁸ Ezek 37:3.

⁹ In any event he does not rule out that possibility, and the readers would not expect him to do so.

¹⁰ This is not so much *foretelling* as *forth telling*. God gives power *through* the prophetic word, i.e., in partnership with the prophet actually speaking. The ultimate purpose of God saving power is to restore life.

¹¹ Ezek 37:5-6.

¹² Ezek 37:7.

¹³ See also Ezek 36:26-27: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you . . .”

¹⁴ Gen 2:7. Note, the Hebrew word for spirit (*ruach*) is the same for breath.

¹⁵ Ezek 37:10.

¹⁶ See in Dan 12:2; 2 Macc 7:22-3. People would have considered bodily resurrection in Ezekiel’s day as, basically, absurd!

¹⁷ Ezek 37:12. (The reference to “whole house” is very significant, as the rest of the chapter will make clear.)

¹⁸ Ezek 37:14. Such texts have taken on new meaning with the formation of the Jewish state post WWII. While some Jews – and Christians – find this significant, caution is strongly advised. Scripture can be mis-applied. (Ezek 37:24.)

Without doubt this was a graphic message of encouragement in desperate times.¹⁹ But there is more shocking news revealed in the rest of the chapter. God is not *only* going to restore Judah, the exiled Southern Kingdom, but God will return the earlier “lost tribes of Israel,” those from the Northern Kingdom taken into captivity by the Assyrian Empire 130 years earlier.²⁰ This vision, then, is of restoration—or grafting—into *one people* of the tribes of Judah *and* Israel, divided since the death of Solomon some 400 years earlier.²¹ (Incidentally, despite the glory of King Solomon, he made major mistakes and the squabbles upon his death resulted in his kingdom being split in two; the Rogers dynasty is not the first to fall out!) What God says next is equally important: “My servant David will be king over them; there will be one shepherd for *all* of them.²² David my servant will be prince over them forever. I will make *a covenant of peace* with them . . . My dwelling place²³ will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.”²⁴ There are messianic overtones here, and perhaps also an allusion to that great Day of the Lord that I mentioned last week.²⁵

I suggest our second reading from John’s Gospel also alludes to Ezekiel’s vision. Jesus is in Samaria having an in-depth conversation with an unnamed woman at Jacob’s well.²⁶ We often comment on the issues of gender and social taboos when we consider that account, and rightly so. But the *geography* is also important because Samaria is the old Northern Kingdom and John tells us that Jesus the Messiah is deliberately going out his way to pass through this region.²⁷ He is seeking out those lost tribes of Israel and wants to include them in the single, united, kingdom of God. Remember that the backdrop of the parable of the good Samaritan²⁸ was the ongoing animosity between Jews and Samaritans, whose origins go back to those ancient tribes of Judah and Israel, those two kingdoms. Evidently, Ezekiel’s vision of the restoration into *one people* had yet to be realized. If you think this connection is a stretch, don’t forget Jesus chose 12 disciples, not 7 or 10 or some other number. They are symbolic of the twelve tribes of the nation of Israel; Jesus is signaling that he is the messianic King—the one shepherd—and coming to inaugurate a united, kingdom of God. And recall what the risen Jesus later said to his disciples: “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea *and Samaria*, and to the ends of the

¹⁹ In fact, this prophecy is not dated and the faithful have repeatedly found its contents to be inspiring and uplifting.

²⁰ In c.722/721 BC. (See also Jer 3:18; Zech 11:10-14). The northern Kingdom of Israel is named here as Joseph/Ephraim (Ezek 37:16, 19).

²¹ In c.931 BC.

²² Ezek 37:24. See also Ezek 34:23, where God promised “David” is the one shepherd and prince for all the people.

²³ The word “dwelling place” alludes to where the *Shekinah*—the visible glory of God’s presence—resided. This is point is picked up in the famous prologue of John’s Gospel: “Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory—the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father” (John 1:14). The “took up residence” phrase is literally “tabernacled” in Greek and alludes to the *Shekinah*. The implication being that the divine glory is now to be seen in Jesus, and they had witnessed it!

Earlier in his prologue, John writes:

²⁴ Ezek 37:25b-26a, 27.

²⁵ See: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/A-Cloud-of-Witnesses.pdf> .

²⁶ See John 4:4-42.

²⁷ See John 4:4. (v5 gives more geographical details to make sure the readers understand the point!)

²⁸ See Luke 10:25-37.

earth.”²⁹ Christ’s intent is clear and this discussion with the woman at the well highlights that fact. That ancient division between the Northern and Southern Kingdoms also resulted in separate places for the people to worship God. (The Samaritans worshiped God on their holy Mount Gerizim, whereas the Jews worshiped God at the temple in Jerusalem.) Recognizing that Jesus was some sort of a prophet, she wondered what his take was on this very contentious issue between Jews and Samaritans. He replies: “A time is coming *and has now come* when the true worshipers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.”³⁰ Implicit in this text is that this “coming time,” or new era, has arrived in the person of Jesus himself. John then tells us that Jesus reveals to her that she is speaking to the Messiah.³¹ She goes back to her Samaritan village, and they invite Jesus to stay with them. And he does for two days, and more people came to believe in him, exclaiming “This one really is *the Savior of the world*.”³² John is proclaiming to his readers that the Messiah, that Davidic Shepherd, has come and he is drawing in lost sheep into one flock.³³ God is restoring his disunited people, as Ezekiel had prophesied. Later in John’s Gospel, he later records Jesus as saying, “I have other sheep that do not come from this sheepfold. I must bring them too, and they will listen to my voice, so that there will be one flock and one shepherd.”³⁴ That one flock includes you and me, all who will hear and respond to Christ’s voice.

What might all this say to us in 2021? Ezekiel’s vision of a seemingly impossible event tells us *never* to give up on God’s saving power. When we think the pandemic will never end because we don’t seem to be able to pull together; when we think polarized politics is here to stay because no one will compromise; when we think there will be no progress in addressing climate change because countries just won’t cooperate; or consider 80 years ago at the time of Pearl Harbour, when people wondered whether an expanding world war would ever end. When our bones are dry and hope is all but gone, let us believe that highly improbable feats are indeed possible.³⁵ Yet not because *we imagine* we can do it, but because the *Lord God* has spoken, and we can rely on God to do what he promises.

In conclusion, when we have witnessed something that’s unanticipated and seemingly impossible, we often say, “I can’t believe my eyes.” That was Ezekiel’s reaction to his visionary experience. We are invited, along with Ezekiel’s readers, to look beyond what our mundane eyes can see so that we can watch the impossible happen through *God’s eyes*.³⁶ When we do that, we get a glimpse of the unimaginable reasons to keep on hoping, through the desert be dark and dry, and the promised future of peace may seem far away. On a different occasion, after the crucifixion and death of Jesus, all hope

²⁹ Acts 1:8b, see 1:6-11 for context. See also Acts 8:4-25 where Luke details the fulfillment of Christ’s instruction.

³⁰ John 4:23.

³¹ John 4:25-26, 29.

³² John 4:42.

³³ See also John 10 and Reddish, *The Jesus I Didn’t Know I Didn’t Know* (Wipf & Stock, 2021) 47-52.

³⁴ John 10:16.

³⁵ When the New Testament writers exclaim “All things are possible with God” (Matt 19:26; Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27), the context is (generally) *salvation* (cf. Ezekiel’s vision), not any miracle we may desire to see realised.

³⁶ Seeing things through God’s eyes (or perspective) is, after all, what a *vision* is!

was gone for his followers. Yet in the resurrection, God transformed a hopeless, lifeless situation—a dead body—and raised Jesus back to life. That, ultimately, is the foundational basis of our Christian hope.³⁷ That instrument of scandalous disgrace—the cross—has become for Christians of every age a powerful symbol of hope, of life beyond death, and of God’s salvation, of God’s kingdom becoming a reality in the power of the resurrection. The question is, “Are we today willing to believe our eyes?”

Finally, Ezekiel obviously recognized that part of the God’s transformative work, making the seemingly impossible possible, required much more than a divine vision. In the previous chapter, God again speaks to his people through his prophet saying, “A *new heart* I will give you, and a *new spirit* I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”³⁸ When we think of the seemingly intransigent problems of our world, of polarized politics, of climate change, of abuse, violence, and war—and the very real problem of what the Bible calls “sin”—we know deep down that real change needs a *new heart* to replace a dead heart of stone—one that is more tolerant and respectful of our differences, one that believes in truth over lies, facts over fantasies—and of grace over guilt. As Christians we believe that new living heart is the Holy Spirit at work within all God’s people. Sadly, the divine Spirit is not always evident within us, as we can still be a divided people, pulling in different directions. Yet, I continue to live in hope—not because of our own capabilities to fix things, but because *God* is still at work in the world and in his church. That hope is also reflected in the words of Sam Cooke’s classic song: “It’s been a long, a long time coming. But I know *a change gonna come*. Oh, yes it will.”³⁹ I believe “a change gonna come.” Amen. Let us pray.

³⁷ See 1 Cor 15:12-19.

³⁸ Ezek 36:26. See also Ezek 11:19; Jer 31:33; Heb 8:10.

³⁹ “A Change Gonna Come,” 1964.