

Zombies and Spirits

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 around 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."

Halloween's tomorrow. And for my money, if I'm going to watch a movie for the season, I'll see *It's The Great Pumpkin Charlie Brown*, or *A Pumpkin Full of Nonsense* – both rated PG or lower. This weekend, the TV schedule has been loaded with Halloween flicks, both cheesy and scary. And though I don't really watch them, I understand why people do. But can someone please explain to me the nation's growing love affair with zombies?

I'm not much of a zombie girl. I mean, I understand vampires and werewolves, but zombies just don't make sense to me. I'm not sure what there is to get scared about. I remember when my family visited Yellowstone National Park, and the rangers were giving us basic advice about what to do if the animals got too close. If you find yourself too close to a coyote, we were instructed to give it a good, swift kick in the snout. Really? This is the advice from the nature-loving, park-protecting rangers? Not sure what PETA thinks of this, but it did stick in my head. And I'm pretty sure that would be my reaction to an army of the undead, with their feeble, disintegrating bodies. One swift kick, and I'm outta there.

From what I can tell, that's a pretty unorthodox response. Apparently the undead are persistent, and a good swift kick will only delay them for the briefest of moments. So what should we do if we're overrun with zombies? You could look at a variety of crazy websites, or you could take your advice from an actual government organization. That's right, the CDC, our very own Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has created a preparedness website for zombie attack. Admittedly, it's a tongue-in-cheek way to encourage people to be prepared for more likely survival situations, including hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes. So they suggest having emergency food and water, a family meeting place and evacuation route.

But in our Scripture reading this morning, God gives us a different course of action in case we are overwhelmed with zombies. Our fearless leader in this zombie apocalypse is Ezekiel, prophet of Israel during their darkest days. The Babylonians are in power, both Israel and Judah have fallen, the temple has been destroyed, and the people have been forced into exile. In the midst of this timeline, God brings Ezekiel to a valley.

This is not a happy valley nestled between majestic mountains. No one lives here. This dark valley was the site of some massive battle, and the ground is littered with the bones of those who died here. I picture the scene from the movie *The Lion King*, where Simba tries to prove his courage by going to the elephant graveyard. There are bones and skeletons everywhere – only for Ezekiel, these aren't elephant bones. These bones are the last remains of real people. This was a dismal, depressing place.

God speaks. “So Ezekiel, what do you think. Can these bones live again?” Any moderately intelligent person would look at this valley of death and say, “No Lord. Maybe right after the battle, there were some who could've been saved with amazing medical technology. But these aren't just dead bodies. They are skeletons. Dry bones turning into dust.” But Ezekiel

suspects this may be a trick question. And he has seen the power of God. So instead of giving the obvious answer, Ezekiel says, “Only you know that.”

It’s a good thing Ezekiel goes with that answer, because God does have a plan to bring life to these dry bones. He tells Ezekiel to prophesy to them. That’s right; Ezekiel gets to preach to a bunch of skeletons. And as he’s telling these hip bones and knee bones and ankle bones to “hear the word of the Lord,” they do something amazing. The scattered bones start to reassemble into complete skeletons. That’s a pretty good trick, but God’s not done yet. The bones were then covered with flesh and skin. And right there, before his eyes, those dry bones become human bodies. But not living bodies. Just corpses. These are zombies if ever there were. They were dead, and now they’re not.

But God’s not done yet. So Jeremiah reminds the bones that they need breath, “and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet...” To understand the text here, we need to know that the words breath and wind and spirit are all the same Hebrew word: *ruach*. This time when Ezekiel preaches, the breath (or Spirit) of the living God enters the lifeless bodies and they come alive. It’s like what happened back in Genesis, when God formed the first human body out of dust, and then breathed into it and it became a living being. It’s like what Jesus says needs to happen to Nicodemus – being born again by the Spirit, the breath of God. It’s like what happened in the days after the first Easter, when the risen Christ brought together the scattered disciples to form a body of believers, and then on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit breathed life into them.

Okay, so what’s the point? Why is God bringing all these bones back to life? He says to Ezekiel that the bones were like the Hebrew people. If bones could speak, they would have said, “Our hope is lost. We have no future. We have been cut off from Israel.” How have the Jews

been cut off from Israel? The temple, God's house, has been destroyed. The people are in exile. They don't only feel cut off from the land, but from God.

They were like zombies because their hope was gone. And there are millions of people who are like this today. People who have no hope because they have lost a job, or a home, or a loved one. People who have no hope because they have been diagnosed with cancer, or AIDS, or diabetes, or depression. People who have no hope because they don't have access to clean water or don't know where their next meal is coming from. People who have no hope because they don't yet know or trust in the future that God is building.

If that's what it is to be a zombie, to live without hope, then certainly we are in the midst of a zombie apocalypse. And I don't think the CDC can help us deal with this one. But God outlines his plan for how he can intervene, and how we can help. First, God says, "I will open your graves and bring you out of your graves." In other words, God says he will meet us where we are. He will come and be with us, even in our darkest places. And he will bring us out of those places. He will not abandon us to hopelessness. And we need to do this too. People who are hopeless are not likely to wander into our church on Sunday morning. We need to go to them, where they are, and take them out of hopeless situations.

Second, God promises to put his spirit within us, in order that we may live. We all know that you can't run from your problems – not forever. God isn't taking us out of one grave only for us to stumble into another. God is filling us with his breath, his spirit, in order that we might have hope. That we might have meaning and purpose for our lives. Now we can't put God's spirit into anyone. But we can do what Ezekiel did. We can prophesy to God's spirit. We can tell people what we have experienced in our own lives. We can share how the Spirit brings us life.

And last, God says he will place you on your own soil. Remember, God set up this whole scenario as a metaphor. This isn't God saying he's going to dig us out of the dirt only to put us back on the dirt. Remember that the land, the Promised Land, was really important to the Israelites. It was part of their covenant. It was where they believed God resided. And here is God, telling Ezekiel that the people will be able to return to the land. In a broader sense, that means God will put us where we can continue to be connected with him. For the Israelites, that was Israel. For us, that's our church community.

God has given us this place and this community. He has given us a church family in order that we might see God more easily. In order that we might support and encourage one another. But also in order that we might show God to those who are not here yet. And so that's what our ministries here are designed for. We worship and study, so that we might come closer to God. We fellowship and pray, so that we might better know and uplift each other. We reach out in mission and service, so that others might see God through the hope we can bring to them.

And ministry is what is represented in our pledges this morning. Ministry that brings hope for our own lives, hope overflowing into the lives of those we may not even know. And so we don't bring forward our pledges like zombies. We don't give under compulsion or in mindless response to a request. Because we are not zombies. We are children of God, filled with God's own breath, created with limitless potential to love God and love one another. And so we give with joy! We give because our lives are filled with the Holy Spirit. Our gifts are filled with the spirit. And we are committed to finding ways to use these pledges for spirit-filled and spirit-led ministry. Amen and amen.