

## Sermon: Hope Renewed by the Spirit

Seth C. Burgess, seminarian  
Sunday, April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017  
10:00am Worship  
Lyons First Presbyterian Church  
11 Queen Street, Lyons, NY 14489

### Scripture for the Fifth Sunday in Lent<sup>1</sup>

*Ezekiel 37:1–14*  
*Psalm 130*  
*Romans 8:6–11*

### ***Loss of Hope***

Growing up in Newark, as a member of a family which had been in Newark for several generations, something that came up now and again was the subject of the so-called “urban renewal” project of the 1970s and 1980s. Even before I really cared to learn anything about the effects of it myself, it was clear to me that this urban renewal was not a thing that should be recalled fondly—it was not to be remembered as a proud time in the history of Newark.

Even now, when I see postcard images or photographs of Newark that are several decades old—it often seems to me more like looking at a scene from a movie, not my own hometown. In many cases, I can only imagine that what the photos show is true—I can only believe in the records of the past, and those who tell stories of it. Downtown Newark before urban renewal is barely recognizable as the place that I have intimately come to know.

Opera houses, movie theaters, department stores, government buildings, and fraternal organizations are strewn across the scene, to name a few. Real buildings, with real architecture. My dad frequently refers to an earlier time period that he is familiar with as “back when life was *real*,”—and I am pretty sure he is referring to Newark and the surrounding area in the time of his childhood, in the 1950s and 1960s, or even perhaps earlier from the stories he was told by his parents and grandparents.

But life is no less “real” today than it was 60 years ago, of course. What that sort of nostalgia brings to the surface is a sense of loss over things loved, or things expected. When it comes to urban renewal in Newark, folks who remember it as a destructive force may have developed a loss of hope for a return to the vibrancy that such a bustling community once felt like. Even those of us who have only seen the photos of what once was can learn that same loss of hope, or buy into a sad sense of hopelessness for our Wayne County communities.

### ***Worse Than Before***

I imagine that wherever each one of us here is originally from, there have been times when you have paused to wonder where things are headed for a community that for you once seemed different—healthier, better. From an outsider’s perspective, the little downtown area of Lyons

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<sup>1</sup> Revised Common Lectionary Readings for Sunday, April 2, 2017, the Fifth Sunday in Lent Year A), <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/devotion/revised-common-lectionary/2017/4/2/>

appears to have fared better than other Erie Canal communities in Wayne County and Upstate New York, but that is not to say the same sadness of what this place once was is not here. Much of the reason Lyons has maintained a flavor of the past and is able to give us at least some feeling of hanging on to its unique personality is due to hard work by individuals and community programs in recent years, promoting ideas such as “This Place Matters” and by the presence of a Main Street Program, and by the generosity of community-minded business people—some who left legacy funds and some who give back to Lyons today, from near and far.

Even in the face of the presence of these things, though, we still doubt whether the good signs we see will last... for we have seen so much that has not. All it takes is a walk or a drive past a row of unkempt residences, or the simple mention of the Department of Social Services building. A seed is planted in our minds that what is real today is sadder, more hopeless than what we desire—that we are worse off than before. And in *our story* in the Bible, this is part of a cycle that we are always experiencing in our relationship with God—a movement away from hope, followed by a movement back toward it.

### ***From Death to Life***

As a priest and prophet, Ezekiel’s ministry occurred early in the 6th century B.C.E., during Israel’s exile in Babylon. What the people of Israel are feeling at that time, is death—the death of the community of God’s chosen people. It would seem that little could be more depressing or dramatic than that. While we ourselves see local churches closing, just around the corner—which we do mourn—how much more significant would the feeling be if we believed we were observing the death of the entire worldwide Church community? That is basically the point that the Israelites had come to, where we find them in Ezekiel’s time. They are wondering what went wrong, and where God is. These sentiments shape the critical backdrop for the importance of Ezekiel in Scripture, it being “almost our only source of information about the early years of exile.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the book of Ezekiel, the prophet’s “message moves from death to resurrection”<sup>3</sup> in a way that is echoed in the New Testament when Jesus raises Lazarus, dead for four days, to life. <sup>4</sup> Rather than enacting a miracle though, as Jesus does, Ezekiel’s message is shared with Israel in the form of a vision. As God’s spokesperson, the vision is given to Ezekiel “by the hand of the LORD.”<sup>5</sup> The text reads:

*“... 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.” (Ezekiel 37:1-2)*

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<sup>2</sup> Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death & Resurrection of Israel, p. 121

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> John 11:17,39

<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel 37:1

The valley of dry bones<sup>6</sup> in chapter 37 is not an actual place, but it is real enough that it speaks to the hearts of people “in the midst of seemingly hopeless conditions.”<sup>7</sup> The profound sense of despair of the Israelites in Babylon is further articulated in Ezekiel 37:11, which laments, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Like a dead man in a tomb, as was Lazarus when Jesus came to him, the “whole house of Israel”<sup>8</sup> is portrayed at this point in Scripture as perceiving itself to be irretrievably destined to a situation as permanent as physical death. But in the vision, Ezekiel is asked by God, “Mortal, can these bones live?”—to which he answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” And of course, God does know—but Ezekiel being a priest of strong faith does also. Ezekiel believes that God’s divine purpose of restoring all the heavens and the earth is inevitable, regardless of the Israelites’ plight in exile.

As a demonstration to those whom Ezekiel will recall the vision to, God commands the prophet to prophesy to the dry bones—who represent individual Israelites—and when Ezekiel does as commanded, “suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.” Ezekiel “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.” After further prophesying by God’s command, “the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”

God uses the “two-stage resuscitation”<sup>9</sup> of the bones in Ezekiel 37 to provide instruction that there’s a difference between appearing to be alive (ie. bodies with all the necessary physical signs of health), and being alive the way God desires us to be—by the breath of the Spirit of God. While prophetic visions can be strange, confusing, or in the case of the valley of dry bones slightly grotesque, it is part of what we are given in God’s Word. Rather than avoiding discussion of death—a seemingly endemic tendency of our society today, which yearns to rather daydream of perpetual comfort and material prosperity—we should engage the death versus life teachings given us in Scripture as well as the realities of death before us. It will assist us to be honest before God, and also to better connect with a text like Ezekiel’s vision in Chapter 37, which God uses to reveal to us the working of the holy spirit in our path as God’s people—both individually and in community—from death and hopelessness to life in the land God is transforming, for us.

### ***Renewed from Death***

Ezekiel noticed that even when the dry bones were reconstituted with organs, muscles, and flesh what he was seeing was still nothing more than corpses. But when the holy spirit entered these, it was then that life was renewed. This is also part of your task in the world, as a Christian. Be cognizant of when your own actions, or the realities of the world immediately in front of you, are instances of the substance of death—meaning devoid of God’s spirit. Or at

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<sup>6</sup> Ezekiel 37:1-2

<sup>7</sup> Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life, p. 272

<sup>8</sup> Ezekiel 37:11

<sup>9</sup> The New Interpreter’s Study Bible, p. 1211

least spend some time asking God to help make these more clear to you. For when you understand and acknowledge that death is in your life, you can then turn toward the higher understanding that Jesus' ministry is right before you. Knowing that God's holy breath is fully able to transform death—and having been told that the same breath is in you—you then, can become an agent of hope for God's kingdom in the here and now.

### ***The Promise of Hope***

Whenever we walk down the street and sadly reminisce about the downward turn things have taken, or whenever we find ourselves in conversation agreeing that we now live in a place better for leaving than loving—it is our challenge as Christians to be like Ezekiel in Babylon and twist around what the basis of that negative thought is. Rather than primarily understanding the situation we are addressing as being a lost cause or hopeless—a valley of dry bones—we can learn to choose to see the places and problems of our communities as mission fields. Each of these mission fields matters to God, and we believe that there is nothing God cannot do. We believe in resurrection. We should speak truly when things are not good, yes—but we then must also cast a vision for what lay ahead.

As there was a strong basis for hope for the Israelites in exile, so today is there always the promise of hope for us—not because of anything we might choose for ourselves, but because it is the will of God. Since our “God wishes to restore the divine reputation in the world and to dwell among a transformed community,”<sup>10</sup> let us be the first ones to speak and project hope in the face of unhealthy negativity. We know that God is for us and all people. Even now, a new creation is underway by the powerful workings of the Spirit—which in Christ, dwells in us.<sup>11</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> The New Interpreter's Study Bible, p. 1154

<sup>11</sup> Romans 8:9-11