

### **Ezekiel 37:1-10**

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 round 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.

### **“I Have a Bone to Pick with You”**

**Rev. Charles Schuster**

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On the night he proposed to the girl of his dreams, he confessed. "Before you agree to marry me, there's something I must tell you, something that may change your whole attitude about me. I want you to know..." and there was a long pause. "I want you to know that I am a somnambulist." And she looked at him with a smile on her face and said, "That's okay. I'm a Methodist. We'll go to my church some Sundays and then we'll go to yours on other Sundays." For those who don't know it, I had to look it up myself, a somnambulist is a person who walks in their sleep. And it can be a problem in a marriage. It can be a problem in a church if we have sleepwalkers, because the issues involved in our faith journey are too important, and we can't afford to sleepwalk through them.

Karl Rahner was a theologian. The last letter he wrote before his death was a response to a letter he got from a drug addict. "You theologians talk about God, but how can this God be relevant in my life?" And Rahner answered, "I must confess to you in all honesty that for me, God is and always has been an absolute mystery. I do not understand what God is. No one can. But we have intuitive inklings. And we make inadequate attempts to put mystery into words."

We cannot sleepwalk through the questions put by the young man who asked, "How can God be relevant to my life." Or the question the prophet Ezekiel asked - "Can these bones live?" What will bring life when our bones are dry? What will give muscle and movement when there is atrophy and paralysis of faith? What will breathe breath into our lungs when we are short of air or faint in spirit? Can these bones live? Can we live? Are we alive? Is there dawn after dark? Is the eleventh Commandment really, "Thou shalt get

by"? Did God speak? Does God act? How does God act in our world? When all we have is intuitive inklings of God, is there God? Can these bones live?

I took a seminary class from a professor who lost sleep at night worrying what would happen when we got turned loose on the church. And the class was on the theologian Alfred North Whitehead, and I remember the time that he stopped his lecture, Dr. Brown stopped his lecture in the middle of the class one day. He looked at us and he said, "Don't, whatever you do, use Whitehead in the church." A sermon in honor of Del Brown has been directed by the prophet Ezekiel and Alfred North Whitehead. We're going to show him.

Alfred North Whitehead urges us not to sleepwalk through our faith, not to be discouraged about God. Whitehead believes faith in God is trust, that the ultimate nature of things lie together, to experience faith in God is to know that in being ourselves, we are more than ourselves. To know that while the harmony of logic lies upon the Universe, the harmony stands before us as a living ideal mobilizing the general flux in its broken progress toward finer issues, and God said, "What?" And Whitehead said, "God, don't you know you are the poet of the world leading it by the vision of truth, beauty, and goodness" and we say, "Can these bones live?" What will wake us up? Is God the poet of the world? And God said, "Say more, and I will." God is the poet of the world. Whitehead thought that. Leading the world by a vision of truth and beauty and goodness. And I think we can get this, because I think we experience it, every one of us.

Have you ever felt God leading you by the vision of truth, first of all? The poet of the world speaks truth, but truth has consequences. Jesus said God seeks to have us worship in spirit and in truth, that we come to expect that we will know the truth, and that the truth will set us free, but first it will set us off. And sometimes it will disturb us. Sometimes we refuse to speak the truth. We will not speak it. I have a friend who is a pastor in South Carolina. Willie Tigg is his name, we were at seminary together. Several years ago, Willie and I got together and we were talking and you know how these conversations go, they go in whatever field..... This was ten years ago, so it wasn't anybody here. I said, "The church I serve, for the most part it's good, but I've got this one church member, sits right about where you are, sits right there and reads her Bible and shakes her head while I'm preaching." And Willie said, "I've got a whole congregation like that. These are mean people. And you know, Chuck, I'm not even going to tell them about hell. I'm going to let them find it out for themselves and be surprised."

Sometimes we don't tell them the truth because they don't deserve to hear it, and sometimes we don't tell people the truth because we're not sure we know it, and sometimes we don't hear the truth because we'd rather pretend it isn't. It's not what we want to hear. It's what we need to hear. Jameson Jones loved to tell the story of the young Indian who goes to his grandfather and says, "Oh great wisdom, silver one, can you tell me the most important steps that I can take to become a chief like yourself?" "Well," the great wise leader said, "First of all you must pluck the fur from the tail of the sacred mountain lion. And then you must bring down the giant white buffalo with your bare hands, and you must wrestle the brown bear, two out of three falls. And then there is the

trial by water, and then there is the trial by fire." And the young man looked at the great silver one and said, "Whatever happened to wholesome good looks and a nice personality?"

The truth is hard to hear. The truth - John McMurray said, "False religion says, 'Fear not, trust in God, and God will see that none of the things you fear will happen to you.' Truth - True religion, on the other hand, says, 'Fear not, the things that you are afraid of could, quite likely, happen to you, but they are nothing to be afraid of.'" There's a difference. The words of Vaclav Havel: "It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out." Now, that's the truth. God is the poet of the world, leading the world to truth. Tuesday night our church leaders had a meeting. We had to face a hard truth. We frankly had a poor finance campaign. We aren't able to do what we need to do, because we don't have the resources to do it. So what? Do we cut our programs? Do we tell you the truth, and make a decision? Let the congregation know? Let us all know that if we all do just a little bit more, each of us, we will have the music program we want, we hope for? We'll have the youth program, we'll have the adult classes, the college ministry? We've got to do a little more? What will we do? I threatened to stay, and they said, 'No, you don't have to do that. Let's tell the congregation the truth and give people a chance to support the church like we know they'd want to.'" So you'll get a letter.

And then, after we made that decision, there was excitement in the group, because we knew that we're all in this together. That was Tuesday. Now, on Wednesday, the building task force met. That's the next day, and I said to them, "Maybe you ought to wait till the new senior pastor comes, before you think about building a new fellowship hall, gymnasium or renovation, or whatever you want to do. Maybe you ought to wait." They looked at me and said, "We're not going to stop moving forward just because you defected." I thought, "God is the poet of the Universe, leading this church with a passion for truth." And Whitehead said, "To experience faith is to know that, in being ourselves, we are more than ourselves." In spite of the consequences, we seek the truth and always, every chance we get, even bad news is good news if we discover the truth that we did not know. For truth links us to something that is high, to something that is holy. For truth pulls from what is great, and sometimes, greatest. For truth frees us to live with conviction, because we know what we can trust. There is a foundation, and when there is a foundation, one can gather traction, and when there is traction, there is movement forward.

What is the source of truth? What is leading this church to its future? What lies ahead for us? What lures us toward it? What takes us to the high ground so we can find common ground? The poet of the world. These bones can live. The truth is heard. The truth has its consequences. God is leading us by it, and beauty. God is the poet of the world, leading by a vision of beauty. There was the night at Boettcher Hall in Denver, Andre Watts played the piano with the Colorado Symphony. When the conductor got so caught up at one point he let go of his baton, and the violinist, the first violinist, had to pick it up and give it back to him, and Andre Watts turned that piano into a whole different instrument, made sounds that a piano's not supposed to make, and he was playing Brahms and it was

no lullaby, and the music was filled with power and charged with energy, and his hands danced across that keyboard, and his face was contorted in the shapes of those notes, and at times he almost leaped off the bench, and through it all he had to wipe sweat off his brow, but so did all of us. Beauty, God is leading us. There was the day the word came to us that there was a woman who gave birth to a child - no, two children, twins. But they came early, too early. And then there was the day one of them got sick, and there was some question about.. and then there was the day the two little girls went home, and it was the grandfather who talked to us about it. And then there was the day they were baptized, right here in this church. And then there was the day, this past, week when they had a birthday, one year, and their grandfather looked me in the eye and he said, with his eyes, he said, "Aren't they the most beautiful thing in the world you've ever seen? You could ask anybody," he said, with his eyes. God is the poet of the world. God is music in the air. God is beauty in the child.

Loren Eiseley examines a milkweed seed case. Did you ever see one? A milkweed seed case. "I observe no green thing here." He's looking at it. "I detect no transpiration of leaves, no subtle coming of giving a vapor. Little sunlight factories of chloroplast will have dissolved away into the common earth. Beauty, angular, basic. The machinery of life will lie exposed to my view. I ask once more, in what way is it mechanized? I wonder what strange force at the heart of the matter regulates the tiny beating of a rabbit's heart or the dim dream that builds a milkweed pod." I'm going to study Eiseley, beginning this Wednesday. Bring your lunch, join us.

A week ago, I was asked to welcome a group of women, church leaders, Church Women United. When they come into this church, I'm telling you, you just stand a little taller, because those people are movers and shakers, and they were here, and it was on a Friday morning, and Bev Winsett said "Would you say a few words?" Dangerous for a preacher to be asked to say a few words on a Friday, when you've been working on words all week and you haven't had a chance to congeal them into twenty minutes. Speak a few words. I told them that I had a thousand words, and I could see them wince. I said that I heard that a picture is worth a thousand words. I showed them a picture. That's the sunrise on April the 10th. The sunrise. A picture of the expanse of red and yellow and orange. Takes your breath away. I showed them the picture of the sunrise on April the 10<sup>th</sup>, and those were the words of welcome. We're part of something. We're being led by something, and we're inspired by it to do something or to be something, because of it. Dry bones live. Ezekiel, there's a power and a beauty in the eye of the beholder. Talk about the power of God, talk about God in the world, talk about words of God or acts of God. It doesn't mean much, no, it doesn't, but talk about the beauty of babies a year old or the beautiful music before the spectacular sunrise and you don't sleepwalk past that. Can these bones live? What is God doing in the world? God is the poet of the world. Leading the world with visions of beauty. Beauty in the eye of the beholder. Wow. Truth. Beauty. God is the poet of the world, leading the world with goodness. Goodness speaks louder than words. Honest to goodness. Kirk Douglas, the actor, in his mid-eighties, that was the time he resolved he would pick up every hitchhiker he ever saw, and he did. Goodness, the famous movie star picked up a hitchhiker one afternoon, a sailor on leave. Jumped into his car, the threw his

backpack into the back seat, looked at the driver of the car, did a double-take, and then a triple-take, and then said, "Hey, man, do you know who you are?"

Honest to goodness. The power of goodness. How are we known, and by what acts do we perform acts of goodness, and what is the source of that? What prompts us to our acts of goodness? What is the source? Recently in this church we had a memorial service for a woman who had moved here from Hawaii, and about the time she got here, she got this grim diagnosis of terminal. She knew that she wouldn't live very long, and she knew that she didn't have any friends here, and there would be a service. She asked if we'd do the service for her. She was living with her stepson. She visited our church. We talked. I'll tell you something, one thing you can be very proud of, our church and the staff of our church. It doesn't matter if you're a member of the church, it doesn't matter how long you've been a member of the church, it doesn't matter what you give to the church or whether you don't give to the church, or pledge to the church, we treat every person who asks ministry of us with equal respect and dignity. They wanted an organist, they wanted the sanctuary, they wanted a bulletin, they wanted the service recorded, and they wanted me to do the service.

And there were nine people at the service. Everybody there knew each other, except for this one woman nobody knew, a mystery woman. As we walked into the sanctuary, the mystery woman got hold of my arm and said to me, "Now, if you ask people to speak, if you hand them a microphone, ask them to speak about the deceased, don't hand me the microphone. I realize, looking at the picture on the front of the bulletin, that I have come to the wrong funeral." I said, "You know, you signed in, if you want to just leave out the side door, that's okay." She said, "No, I want to be part of this." And she stayed. And when it was over, that family's out on the east getting into their cars, three of them, three cars, the last conversation I heard was that family talking about, "Wasn't it nice that Linda, who knew no one out here, except that person none of us had ever met." And it pleased them to think that Barbara was a symbol of the goodness of this place. And I don't think it was an accident that she came. Honest to goodness, what made her come to the service probably was an accident. What made her stay was something a whole lot greater. It was something that happened, but why? How could it?

What makes people do the kind thing? What makes goodness and mercy? You know, there was a time it was awkward, it was unthinkable when you sort of measure it, he got up from the table and he did it. They objected. They said to him, "You shouldn't be doing this." They said to him, "You're not supposed to do this. It's not something you should do. You're above this. You're our leader. It's unseemly for you..." Well, apparently while they were telling them not to, he went ahead and did it. Some people, you can't tell them anything. But he took a towel and a basin of water, and he washed their feet. Honest to goodness, he did. And a soldier at the foot of the cross, a Roman soldier who knew nothing of the Gospel, who knew nothing about eternal life, a soldier at the foot of the cross looked into the eyes of that same Christ on the cross and said, "Surely this man is the son of God." Honest to goodness, he was. What makes people do that? God is leading the world with goodness. Can these bones live? Somnambulistic Methodists, we who have an intuitive inkling, who make inadequate attempts to put mystery into words, we

know truth when we hear it, and will pay the consequences to hear it. We see beauty, it's in the eye of the beholder, and we'll look. And we experience goodness, and it liberates us to be honest to goodness. And what's behind it if not God? Who is, I think, with Whitehead, the poet of the world. I've got a bone to pick with you. These bones can live, because God is still in the world, leading us. Let us pray.

O God, continue to remind us that in being ourselves, we are more than ourselves, and help us to see that you are in the passing flux of immediate things. Amen.