

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 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.

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.'

Mark 9: 33-37

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'

“Hope: Not Just for Presidents Anymore”**Rev. Joel Kershaw****February 15, 2009**

I want to begin with a few thank-yous. As you may have noticed, this is Camp Hope Sunday, and there are some people who deserve some thanks. I want to start with Bill Henderson, member of the church for a long time, and also a longtime member of the Buckhorn board. He's been spearheading our efforts to raise money for Camp Hope and Buckhorn over the last several years, and keeping that in front of us. I also want to thank Greg, who is off to meet with another group who is going to, hopefully, use the camp,

thank him for coming down. But most of all I want to thank you all, for you continued support of Camp Hope. Camp Hope is something that touched my life at a very young age, and was a huge part of who I am, and it gives me hope to know that that camp should be around for a long time, thanks to people like you and your generous gifts over the last few years.

We find ourselves at a crossroads in history. We find ourselves in the depths of economic woes, we find ourselves in the midst of political change, we find ourselves on the brink of ecological disaster and social upheaval and you can name your problem, and in the midst of this, it seems that all hope might just be lost. Well, hope's a funny thing. I found myself alone in my basement, preparing for today, pondering the one question, "What is hope?" What is hope? Is hope putting a placard in your yard and casting your ballot for this candidate or that? Is hope naively ignoring or glossing over the challenges that face our world today? Is hope our only option when time is running out and the path just isn't clear? Is hope the stuff of fools who cannot seem to grasp the troubles that are coming? Or maybe, is hope putting on my John Elway jersey each fall, desperately trying to convince myself that this is the year we're coming back? There is hope. There is hope.

Well, whatever you think of these ideas, Ezekiel did not seem to think so. Now, don't get me wrong, Ezekiel was not shy about letting you know just how bad things were. No matter what you think of the state of our country, our economy, or, God help them, the Broncos, our woes pale in comparison to the people of Ezekiel's audience. Pale in comparison. Ezekiel was a temple priest, you see, in Jerusalem, and when the invading armies conquered the southern kingdom of Judah, he and several other leaders of the Jewish community were peeled off and sent into exile. They were forced to leave the promised land and live out their days as aliens in strange lands. This was compounded by the Jewish connection with their land. This was not just about owning property. This was not about the sovereignty of the Jewish state. This is the land promised them by their God.

Remember the history here. God brings the Hebrews out of slavery and Egypt, leads them through the wilderness, providing for their needs, and brings them to the land he promised their ancestors, that they might live in the land, and be God's people, and Yahweh would be their God. This is more than just political and military domination, but the feeling that they had been abandoned by their God, the feeling that they had been abandoned by their God. Ezekiel the prophet is speaking to a hopeless people, in a hopeless time, in a hopeless position in the history of God's people.

You heard it in the passage this morning that Hilary read so beautifully. After the vision of dry bones, their complaints ring out, "Our bones are dried up." Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost. Isn't that terrible? Our hope is lost. In response to their cries, the Lord brings Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones. These bones are not just dead, you see. Ezekiel wants to make sure you realize they're really dead. This is not about Jesus raising Lazarus after four days in the tomb. This isn't even about Jesus being raised after three days in the tomb. These bones aren't just dead, they're really, really dead. We get it, Ezekiel. These are piles of dismembered bones, lying about a dry valley. They are really

dead. And the Lord asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” Now, Ezekiel does what any of us might do when God asks a question like that of us. He throws it back at God. “Oh, lord God, you know.” Translation, “I have no idea, but I’m guessing the answer is not ‘no’.” “O Lord God, you know.” Ezekiel sees these dry bones through his own eyes, through his own experience of the world, through his own understanding of human mortality. But we can relate to that. But God commands the prophet to speak to the bones, and they come together before his very eyes.

When I told Reverend Everhart that I was preaching on Ezekiel’s dry bones vision, she said, “They must have taught you something special at that school you went to.” Well, they did. Back at Boston University I had a professor of Hebrew Bible who just happened to be one of the world’s foremost experts on Ezekiel. I am still desperately trying to figure out why someone would ever be an expert in Ezekiel. I suppose there has to be someone, right? But she claims that when those bones began to come together, Ezekiel begins to see the valley of dry bones not through his own eyes, but through God’s eyes. He is no longer seeing this vision of God, as so many prophets before and after him, this vision of God, but he is let in on God’s vision for God’s people. This isn’t just a story meant to illustrate a point, this is God’s vision for God’s people. To him this valley is nothing but death and despair, hopelessly lifeless, but when he sees the valley of dry bones through God’s eyes, when we begin to see God’s vision, we realize that the answer to the Lord’s question, “Can these bones live?” is absolutely yes. Yes, they can live. These piles of dry, really, really dead bones become for us a vision of hope to the hopeless. That God is luring us away from the stagnation of hopelessness, and into the propulsion of new possibilities for God’s people. The propulsion of new possibilities for God’s people.

Now, you might be thinking, that’s all well and good, for a vision story in the Hebrew Bible, but I ask you, how are we to see our own circumstances? How are we to peer on the tragedies of our day, of plane crashes in Buffalo, of economic troubles, of world conflict, of poverty, of AIDS, of you-name it? How are we to see those things in our place at the crossroads of history, through the eyes of God? How are we to overcome the hopelessness of our own place in time, in our own exile from the comfortable and secure future? How are we to catch a glimpse of God’s rattling our dry bones? First of all, if we ever hope to see through God’s eyes, we must overcome the limitations of our own expectations. You see, we set the bar too low for God. We set the bar too low for God. God has bigger visions for us. We set the bar too low. We must find a way to see beyond our own limited view of the world.

Some of you know my son Jack, oldest son Jack, just turned three a couple months ago. All the youth know Jack, of course. Jack had kind of a rough start to life. When he was first born, he was born down in Presbyterian St. Luke’s Hospital in Denver, and he had a number of issues, including one that meant he doesn’t have muscles in his shoulders, in his chest and in his neck, that should be there. He has some muscles, but he doesn’t have all of them. So he can’t do some of the things that you or I might be able to do. And the loving doctors and nurses at Presbyterian St. Luke’s tried to prepare Abby and I for the worst. They tried to prepare us for the possibility that Jack might never walk. And they

would tell us, you know, he might need to wear a helmet, because he'll probably bang his head on a lot of things, because he won't have control of it, and he won't be able to do lots of things like maybe draw, or color with crayons, or feed himself, or brush his own teeth. He's going to have a lot of trouble. He might not be able to do any of this. They were lowering our expectations.

But then we found some hope. We found some therapists who were part of that hospital, and later the therapists who are still part of this church, and we worked together to stretch his muscles and to keep his joints limber, and we did all kinds of things to try and enable him, and he can do all kinds of things now. Do all kinds of things. He comes to the Mom's Day Out drop-in day care, he's been here forever. Abby teaches in the two-year-old room now, and he graduated to the three-year-old room back in December, on his third birthday, so he's in with the threes. For those of you who don't have toddlers running around your house, the one-year-old and the two-year old room have their own little playground. You can see it, you go out the south entrance and it's right there on your right. Now, right in front of you as you go out that south entrance is the big playground. Three-year-olds get to go to the big playground, lots of fun.

One day I came from my office down the hall to pick Jack up from Mom's Day Out and I went in the room and he came over and said, "Dad, I went down the slide" and my heart stopped. I checked with my wife, and talked to his teacher, and as it turns out, I was thinking he was just sort of helped up and kind of nudged down a little bit by his teacher, but the fearless soul that he is, he decided.. when you go out there on the playground, there's this slide. He had trouble with slides when he was younger because his head would fall back, and Mom and Dad would go running, but he walked up the steps of this big slide, and he sat down at the top of the steps, and he slid down the slide all by himself. No one around. Just did it. Never mind not walking, he's going down the slide by himself.

Jack is our hope. Jack is our hope. Against all odds, overcoming all the skeptics who told us he couldn't. Jack helps our family remember that with God, these bones can live. These bones can live. Stretching our view of what can be, also means that we must get beyond our tendency to see what is close to us. With near-sighted eyes, we see our small corners of the world with relative clarity. We deeply feel the ups and downs of our own lives and of those around us. But we must broaden a little bit. You heard me talk about the Guatemala mission trip. Every time the youth go on a mission trip, to somewhere, I always get the question from someone or another, "Why do you always go out there? Why do you always go to places like Mississippi and Chicago," and this summer we're heading to a Native American reservation in South Dakota. "Why do you go out there? Why do you go so far away? There's so much we could do here in the church," they ask.

Don't be the person who asks me that, by way, because I'm going to give you the answer. The reason we go out there is because, here is what we know. Here is what we know. This is what the kids and frankly, the adults, know – Fort Collins. What we see when we go there, when we go to a place like Mississippi and work with victims, rather than just seeing them on television, we can see how it changed their lives. We can put up drywall

in their house, shake their hand, pray with them. When we go to a place like Chicago, many of our youth had been there before last summer, but they saw a whole new Chicago when we got there this summer, and I bet they'll never be the same. At least, they'll never see Chicago the same. I'll bet they never see things the same when we get back from South Dakota, either, but that will be another new sermon for next year.

But you see, we get outside of our box, we get outside of our corner, outside of our niche and we find out that the world beyond our little area is vast. But in that vastness there's hope, because there's God. We get outside, we see beyond our own limited understanding of the world. Once we've recognized the limitations of our own expectations and worked to overcome them, the next step to seeing with God's eyes pushes us to seek God's vision at all times and in all places, in all the ways that are hidden by those limitations and expectations. Once the blinders are off, you see, we have to sort of look around a bit. We have to see what's out there. We must seek God's vision, especially, in the most unlikely places, because that's where God tends to hang out. That's where God tends to hang out. You see, Jesus calls us to this very task in Mark. The subtext of this passage in Mark is lost in our 21st-century view of children. I just told you a short story about my son, lifting him up as an example. I'm sure if you talk to any parent or grandparent in the room, they'll tell you, with probably unanimity, that childhood is to be cherished. Kids are great. Wonderful to have the kids, I hear that all the time. Wonderful to have the youth. It's wonderful to have your kids.

Not so in ancient times. Not so. When Jesus takes that child and puts that young person among the disciples, he is essentially taking a non-person, or at least a not-yet-person, and elevating them to the level of teacher. Elevating them to the level of God. You see, in those times, children were not even fully human. Childhood was not something to be cherished, it was something to overcome as quickly as you could, so that you could get on with being human. You weren't listened to, you weren't taken seriously. You weren't quite human. And Jesus takes that and turns it on its head. When Jesus takes that child and says, "When you welcome this child, you welcome me. When you welcome me, you welcome God." He is directing the disciples to seek God in unexpected places. When he speaks to the woman at the well or heals the lepers or eats with tax collectors or feeds the masses, he is saying to all of us that we must look for God in the unexpected. When Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are the poor and mournful, blessed are the meek and hungry, blessed are the merciful and pure, blessed are the peacemakers and the persecuted, Jesus is pointing us. Jesus is directing us. Jesus is imploring us to find God in the unexpected. Even in the very personhood of Jesus himself, we are invited to see God in the unexpected – humanity, of all places – to catch a glimpse of God's vision, see the world through God's eyes.

This is Camp Hope Sunday, as I'm sure you've noticed, and with that I cannot resist, nor could I find a better place for inspiration than my years at camp. One summer when I was twenty, I remember being twenty because it was the summer I met Abby, I had one of the most boring weeks of camp I had ever remembered. Not because I met Abby, I want to make that clear. Because she has spies, and she does. One of the most boring weeks of camp.... Camp starts with sort of a gathering of the people who are going to help that

week, and we assign campers, and my camper was Mike. Mike had some developmental delays, as all the campers do, but he also had the trouble of being blind and deaf. Now think about that. You've got five senses, imagine only having three out of the five. Blind and deaf. Probably knew his mother only because of the way she touched him and the way she smelled. She takes him up to camp, this place he'd never been before, it was his first year. This was my last summer as a counselor, so I don't know if Mike ever came back, but.... Drops him off with a stranger, me, and leaves for the week.

Mike did fine the first day. First day of camp is kind of low-maintenance, we don't really do a whole lot, we just acclimate people to the camp environment, the altitude. But the second day our group had been assigned to go down to the lake and fish. We were to fish that day. Each group takes a turn down at the fishing pond. Now, if you've never been to Buckhorn, Buckhorn sits on top of a mountain and the lake is at the bottom of the mountain. So through some mastery and a lot of volunteers they have made this mountain wheelchair-accessible with this boardwalk that goes from the main camp all the way to the lake. It's a great thing. We weren't sure what Mike was going to do down there, but we were going to try, so off we went. I led him over to the boardwalk, and the boardwalk has a rail at some spots where it gets kind of steep, and doesn't have a rail in some spots. So he'd hold onto the rail when it was there, and he'd hold onto me when it wasn't. We got all the way down to the lake and I thought, "Oh good, we're here. Now what." Well, five minutes later, I found out. He turned around and had found the boardwalk again, and was heading up the boardwalk without me. So off I go to catch him. We walked all the way back to the camp and found the lodge, and he felt his way around the inside of the lodge until he found a couch, and he sat down. And then he laid down, and then he slept. And he slept. And he slept. Right through lunch, right through the afternoon activities, right through dinner, right through the evening activities, and he didn't wake up until we had to move the couch out of the way for our evening campfire. And then he went back to sleep.

Mike slept that whole week. That was our pattern. He would get up, we would get ready and have some breakfast and then we'd go down to the lake and come right back up and he would find that couch and he would sleep. As his counselor, I sat there right next to him. You can see where the boring part comes in. I wasn't sure quite what to do. Read a book. I never get a chance to read a book, but I read a book, and he slept on the couch. Now, in the midst of my boredom, something occurred to me. It would have been easy for me to miss God's vision for Mike. To find God in Mike would have been hard, because I was so bored. But the reality was, that was hard for him. He was in a new place, trusting a new person for the first time. And he let me take him all the way down a mountain through a forest to a lake and back, every day. That was about all Mike could do. He had to sleep after that. It would wear anybody out. That was the beauty of it. That was where I found God, was the fact that he would trust me to do that. That he would trust us, to come to camp, and to be a part of that, to be a witness. To find God in those small places, those unexpected people. But that's the real beauty and treasure of Camp Hope, you see. It is an experiment, began by an unexpected soul, Earl Miller, to gather more unexpected souls, to be a beacon of light that makes plain the God in all of us. That enlightens us to God's vision of how this world could be. That was the genius of Earl

Miller and his camp that will forever bear witness to God in this world. Earl took that glimpse of God's vision, that piece that he understood, and he found a way to participate in bringing that vision to reality. And that's the last piece. That's the last piece. Once we have raised the bar, once we've raised the bar and we've searched for the unexpected places to find God, we must find a way to participate. Once we get that vision of God, we have to find a way to participate in making that vision a reality.

Now, we often imagine God orchestrating our existence, somehow mapping out our path in front of us, writing down what we are to do in some divine book, but I call us today to imagine a world in tandem with God. In tandem with God. Words are a funny thing. I was looking for just the right word to describe what I was trying to say, and I put "tandem" in there. And thanks to the wonder of modern technology, of my computer, I took a click, and there was the definition, and I discovered something about "tandem" I never knew. "Tandem" refers to many things, but one thing it refers to is when you have two horses who are strapped together, front to back, not side to side, front to back, pulling a cart or something. Tandem. And I thought, what a beautiful image for us of God. God is the first horse, pulling us. We, in tandem with God, pulling God's vision from a vision into reality. We work in tandem with God to create the reality from that vision that we find when we see through God's eyes.

What would it mean for us to catch a glimpse of God's vision? What would it mean for us to see with God's eyes? What good would come from us watching as "them dry bones" come together, and receive the breath of life once more? It would mean that our glimpsing calls us to participate, to imagine moving the world closer to that vision. It would mean more than just noticing injustice, more than just happening upon hunger and poverty. It would mean more than just being aware of violence and tragedy. More than just being content to see what might be through God's eyes, but instead responding to that vision be becoming a part of it.

Ezekiel is called to prophesy to the dry bones of that valley. I believe we are called to prophesy to the dry bones that lie around us, including our own. Including our own. To awaken all of creation to God's vision, and to point the way to those unexpected places, until all the world might see God's vision and realize our greatest potential. We are called to start the camps. We are called to go on mission trips. We are called to reach out to those in need in our very own community. We are called to partner with each other as God partners with us, to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. For when we begin to see through God's eyes, when we seek the unexpected, when we participate in God's vision for the world we find that in that vision, hope springs eternal