



Valley of the Dry Bones

God's Presence Brings Life

About the Story

Ezekiel was a temple priest living in Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE. When the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar captured Jerusalem, many of Jerusalem's citizens, including Ezekiel, were forced into exile. It was while in exile that Ezekiel received his call to be a prophet.

Much of Ezekiel's early message was to warn the people remaining in Jerusalem about its forthcoming destruction. He spoke judgment against Jerusalem for abandoning the

covenant with God and warned of impending doom. It seems his prophecies went largely ignored until Jerusalem, along with the temple, was destroyed in 586 BCE. The destruction of Jerusalem served as a sobering validation of Ezekiel's message. Those from Jerusalem that had not already been placed into exile were then sent into exile, and Jerusalem was left in ruins.

From that point forward, Ezekiel's message took on a much more compassionate and hopeful tone. Ezekiel prophesied a restoration of Israel and an end to the exile. He relayed God's promise to never abandon God's people. Ezekiel ended his prophecies by describing a future day when the temple will be restored and the fullness of God's glory will come and dwell within the temple.

Our message today is one of hope. God shows Ezekiel another fantastic vision. Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones. God asks Ezekiel to prophesy to the dry bones, which Ezekiel does. Soon, a rather strange thing occurs: the dry bones come together to form skeletons, then muscles and sinews form on them, before finally skin covers their body. God next tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind, and Ezekiel does. Then, life fills the former skeletons. The passage ends with an explanation of the vision, saying that the bones represent Israel and that their new life represents God's promise to restore the people of Israel to their homeland.

At first glance, this story might seem more appropriate for Halloween than for Advent. We get a detailed description of bones coming together, and the sinews and muscles forming on them in a scene that sounds like it could come from a zombie movie. Yet, at the center of this message is hope: hope that even in the midst of exile and humanity's tendency to turn away from God, God nevertheless promises to remain steadfast, bringing new life in the unlikeliest of places.

The Point:

God's powerful presence brings new life and heals broken relationships. God promises to bring new life to an Israel in exile. Though we often break our end of the covenants, or promises, with God, God remains faithful to us. Even in times when we feel abandoned or forgotten by God, this passage reminds us that God is always present and faithful. Even when we feel we have broken our relationship with God, God continually breathes new life and new hope into us.

Last Week/Next Week

Last week, we learned that God gave hope to the Jewish people living in exile by promising that they will be returned to their homeland. In today's lesson, we learn that God brings new life in unexpected places. Next week, we learn that God promises to be found when we seek God.

Opening Prayer

God of hope, breathe into us new life when we feel discouraged or defeated. Send us out into the world to share your message of hope with the world. We pray this in your name. Amen.

Into the Story

We are now in the second week of Advent, a time in the church year that focuses on our hope for the coming of the Messiah. Ezekiel's message today also is a story of hope: God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel to bring a message of hope in the restoration of Israel. Go around the room and share a time when someone gave you a message of hope and what it meant for you to hear it.

Learning the Story

The story of the Valley of the Dry Bones has Ezekiel preach a message of hope to an Israel in exile. Ezekiel's message shows us that not even death can separate us from God's promises.

Read Ezekiel 37:1-6 – The Valley of Dry Bones

- ❓ How does Ezekiel respond to God's question?
- ❓ What do you think the dry bones and the valley represent in Ezekiel's vision?
- ❓ How might you have reacted if God commanded you to speak to a valley of bones? How might you have responded to God's command?

Read Ezekiel 37:7-10 – New Life

- ❓ Ezekiel was first told to prophesy to the dry bones. Who or what is Ezekiel commanded to prophesy to next?
- ❓ This passage claims that the dry bones were slain but does not explain how. Some scholars think that it refers to a slain army. Who do you think the dry bones represent?
- ❓ God's breath giving new life is a reoccurring theme in the Bible. Count the number of times the words "breath," "wind," or "spirit" appear in this text. They are all translations of the same word. What do you think is the connection between God's breath and life?

Read Ezekiel 37:11-14 – New Hope

- ❓ What is the importance of the promise to be placed on your own soil to a people returning home from 70 years of exile?
- ❓ Scholars debate whether or not Ezekiel's message is meant to be read symbolically (the dry bones coming to life represents Israel coming to life after exile) or literally (the dry bones

are a promise of the resurrection). Which way do you think this passage is meant to be interpreted, and what does either interpretation mean for us?

- ❓ Does this passage communicate hope to you? Why or why not?

Living the Story: Fellowship

Write the names of different bones on individual strips of paper, one for each person in the group. General names can be used for bones, like “leg bone,” or specific names, like “femur,” depending upon your knowledge of anatomy. Give a strip so each member of your group has a “bone,” and then arrange yourselves in order from where their bone is in the body, feet to head.

Once the group has lined-up and verified that they are in the correct order, have each member talk about how God could use the body part that their bone is a part of to bring hope or new life into the world. For example, a person with a foot bone might say that “God can use me to walk a 5K to raise money for a cause,” or a person with an arm bone might say “God can use my arms to embrace people so they feel loved.”

To make this activity more challenging, the group can arrange themselves without talking! Or, if your group is artistically inclined, feel free to draw the bones to make it extra challenging!

Closing Prayer

Form a circle. Begin the prayer together, saying:

God of new life, you promise to breathe new life into our dry bones. Teach us to bring your promised hope into the world. Empower us to share your unfailing love with the world.

Bible Connections

- ✝ God breathes life into the first human (Genesis 2: 4b-9).
- ✝ God hears the cries of God’s people (Exodus 2:23-25).
- ✝ Jesus proclaims that God is a God of the living (Mark 12:18-27).

Bible Nuts & Bolts: Return from Exile

The southern kingdom of Judah fell to Babylon in 587 BCE. The Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the temple and deported the majority of Judah’s population to Babylon. There, the people remained in exile for about 70 years. The Babylonian Empire fell to the Persians, led by Cyrus II the Great, in the mid-sixth century BCE. Cyrus instituted a policy that allowed great leniency and tolerance for peoples’ cultures and religions. Cyrus allowed the Jewish people in exile to return to their homeland and authorized the rebuilding of the temple. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah catalogue the events of the Jewish community returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the city. The two books also catalogue the culture clash that occurred between those returning from exile in Babylon and those who remained living in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas during the exile (Ezra 7–10). The Second Temple was built between 520 and 515 BCE and remained in place until the year 70 CE.

Then, using the list of ways to bring hope or new life into the world from the last activity, begin this prayer together, then go around the circle and have each person say “Use my [body part] to [specific way to bring God’s hope or new life into the world].” For example, “Use my feet to walk a 5K to raise money for a cause.” When you have finished going around the circle, close the prayer together, saying:

We pray this through your name. Amen.

At Home

- ✝ Pray each day for someone or a group of people who you know need to feel a message of hope. Reflect on small, concrete ways you can bring a message of hope to the subject of your prayer.
- ✝ Write a Christmas or holiday card to someone you have fallen out of touch with. Make sure to let them know that you are thinking of them this holiday season.
- ✝ Throughout the week, whenever you come across an obstacle, practice saying to yourself, “O God, you know.” Use these moments to remember that God knows what you are going through and is present with you.

Daily Readings

Sunday—Read Ezekiel 37:1-14

God breathes new life into dry bones and promises to restore Israel. Take a few moments throughout the day to focus on your breathing. Reflect on how you are connected to God through your breath.

Monday—Read Ezekiel 39:25-29

A prophecy of Israel’s restoration. Think about who we as a church or a society have left behind, and pray that God can help us to make sure that no one is left behind.

Tuesday—Read Ezra 1:1-11

The end of the exile. Think about a time when you were away from home for an extended period—perhaps it was a vacation, a visit with friends or family, or a business trip. Reflect on how it felt to finally return home.

Wednesday—Read Ezra 3:1-7

Worship begins in Jerusalem. Pray for all those around the world who are unable to safely worship in their homeland.

Thursday—Read Ezra 3:8-13

The people begin to rebuild the temple. What is one way you can help your congregation? Contact the pastor or appropriate person to see how you can accomplish your idea!

Friday—Read Isaiah 52:3-10

God promises to restore Israel. Write down a short positive message or saying on a slip of paper, then give it to someone you encounter during the day who you feel needs some positivity.

Saturday—Read Isaiah 54:1-10

God’s covenant of peace. Reflect on a grudge that you are holding against someone, and pray that you might be able to find peace and offer forgiveness to that person.