

“No Bones About It”

Sermon – March 29, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

“To thrive in life you need three bones: a wishbone, a backbone, and a funny bone.” So says country singer Reba McEntire.

And that is a philosophy that many of us can relate to: you need to have dreams, you need to work hard for them, but you need to do it with a sense of humor.

But what do you do when life throws you a curve ball that isn't in your control that cuts you to the bone?

Today's Old Testament lesson from the Ezekiel chapter 37 has a lot to say about bones.

In today's passage Ezekiel has a vision where he is in a valley that was *full* of bones that sound like they were bleached in the sun and were as dry as a, uh, bone.

God tells Ezekiel to speak—prophesy—for the bones to hear God's word.

Like a scene out of a science fantasy movie the bones come together. God adds flesh, muscles and tendons to make them strong, and skin to give them form. Yet still they lie lifeless.

God then tells the prophet to speak to the *ruach* (ROO-akh). In Hebrew the *ruach* can mean breath, wind, or spirit. It depends on the context and it is used all three ways in today's passage. The ancients saw that breath, wind and the spirit went together for life. Similarly, in the New Testament, the Greek word, *pneuma* (pnYOO-mah), like our English word “pneumatic,” has the same three meanings and often is often intentionally ambiguous.

When Ezekiel does speak to the *ruach*, the spirit breath blows from the four winds and the bodies live and stand, which God says represent the people of Israel.

“No Bones About It”

Sermon – March 29, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

God goes on to say he will restore them and ends with ““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”

Ezekiel’s vision makes a call on us. It tells us that “bone and flesh” is just dead dust. There is no life apart from the God-breathed spirit, *ruach*. Earlier in the book Ezekiel expresses his pessimism about human goodness and that people are free to make their own choices—and generally not good ones.

But in his vision Ezekiel discovers divine grace instead. It was God who breathed life into humans and who chose a people. Now, Ezekiel says, God will take the initiative yet again: God’s spirit will bring new life to a people dead as stone, dead as bones.

Only grace fills the gap between what we are made for and what we ourselves can manage.

Paul echoes this with today’s passage from his epistle to struggling believers in Rome. It starts with “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”

That is focusing on the ephemeral things of this world only leads to fear, self-centeredness, and death, not only physically but also spiritually.

But to have the mindset of the Spirit leads to life and peace and joy.

When a person's orientation in life is Spirit-directed and Spirit-controlled, the focus is on life, both in this world and in the next, and on peace, both with God and with other people.

As verse 9 says, “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you.” This is not a promise for after you die;

“No Bones About It”

Sermon – March 29, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

you can live in the Spirit in the here and now. Not that you will always be blissful or speaking in tongues. Rather, that as a believer in Christ you live in a new place with new reality structures. Not one structured by sin and death, but living in one structured by Christ, by the Spirit, by life. But you don't enter this new reality on your own. You live in the Spirit because you are “in Christ Jesus.”

As today's epistle passage closes with:

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

Many of you may be grieving, weary, and lacking hope with all that is going on the world and in your own world. It may feel like you are gazing on a valley full of bones wondering if there will life again and I understand that.

And we realize, despite these video technologies that weren't even around 15 years ago, how much we miss human contact and how much contact we had with people without even realizing it.

That despite the ethos of rugged individualism we hopefully realize we are all connected, that there is no “us and them”—there is only us. We are community.

And so may one thing we take out of this crisis is

that we are humbled to recognize that we are all human beings, that each of us has a story, even if we are smiling on the outside, and that each of us can slip to the margins of society in an instant through no fault of our own and so those in need are deserving of our empathy, not our judgment because some way we are all in need.

“No Bones About It”

Sermon – March 29, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

For despite the travails we are under, God, whose power is infinite, is merciful and creates hope just when it is needed.

As followers of Christ, remember the words Jesus said to Martha in today’s gospel lesson at her darkest hour, “I am the resurrection and the life...everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Ezekiel looked on the valley of dry bones and at God’s command he put flesh and sinew on them and breathe into life and then assured Ezekiel that he would be there for his people, saying, “I will put my *ruach*, my breath, my spirit within you, and you shall live.”

In that “spirit” join me now to make that a reality. Close your eyes. Let your shoulders drop, unclench your jaw. Clear your mind and focus on the *ruach*, spirit, or breathing. Breathe in slowly through your nostrils for a count of five, hold, two, three, four, and slowly exhale for a count of seven expelling all the breath out.

Let’s repeat twice more. Through the nostrils, three, four, five; hold, two, three, four; exhale through the mouth, four, five, six, seven.

And once more, in <breathe in>, hold, and long release. Open your eyes and breathe naturally.

As you continue on, use the technique to help reduce stress, so that you let the spirit of God, fill you with a breath of fresh air, to comfort and sustain in the days and weeks to come, and indeed throughout your life.

Despite all that is going on, be assured you have life and peace in Christ—make no bones about it.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.

Amen.

“No Bones About It”

Sermon – March 29, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

I have a friend (Gina Nash) whose dad is in a nursing home, but confused because of dementia and family can't see him. On top of it she had to put her dog down on Friday.

Another friend (Mike Dorn) whose wife at age 40 had a heart attack last month and while doing well, needs to stay healthy for my friend and their two young children.

Another friend (Cristina LaBarbera) who is working as many crazy hours as I do also from home, but also has two young boys to take care of and school with her husband whose work is drying up.

Another (Mary Priore) who recently discovered she had breast cancer and will be starting chemotherapy soon.

Another friend (Ken Giffune) who had to go Syracuse for dialysis because none was available here and is still waiting, hoping not to catch COVID-19.

Another (Phil Conley) who is recovering from recent brain surgery

A young man I know (Evan Leonard) still living at home with his parents because he has depression that is not yielding to treatments.

Our own Ewa Lawrence who has family in Poland including her mother who lives alone and a grandmother turns 99 in June.

And there are many more, of course.

The reality is that people have always had these kind of problems, but when our lives are going well and the economy is going strong, we tend not to see those in need or turn away because it's not pleasant and bursts our pursuit of happiness bubble.

“No Bones About It”

Sermon – March 29, 2020 Stone Presbyterian Church

But now that we are all affected throughout the world, through no fault of our own, and are socially isolated, problems are magnified and solutions more limited and some cases not at all.