

“Spiritual Calcium”

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Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Psalm 104: 1-30

The Psalmist sings of how God brings forth water to sustain animals and all living things. One of the interesting things to me about elephants is how they manage to support 10,000 pounds of weight on their bones and joints. We were at the National Zoo yesterday and read about how the bones and joints of elephants line up in architecturally sound columns to support their enormous weight. Elephants also have elastic pads on their feet which expand when weight is on them and contract when they relax.

Elephants can drink 50 gallons of water per day in order to support those bones. Without the water, the bones and pads dry out.

Elephants aren't born knowing how to draw in all that water however. They are too tall and they struggle bending down to drink from ponds, so a young elephant must learn to draw water up its trunk like a straw and pour it into its mouth. A young calf has to watch its parents to learn how to draw in what it needs for life.

Once they learn, they never forget. Of all animals, they say that elephants have the best memories. They will remember animals and people who they haven't seen for many months.

I was thinking about what it means to remember when a member of my family got to the front of the check-out line at Whole Foods last night only to find that they had forgotten to bring their wallet. Have you ever done that? No credit card, no cash, no checks, just a cart full of frozen foods already rung up by the cashier and a line of people behind them. A phone call to the spouse brought help but this created a memory they will not soon forget.

Scientists say elephants are fascinated by the bones of their dead relatives. Some people even posit that there are elephant graveyards where they remember their dead.

In our second lesson from the 37th chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel helps Israel remember its identity in exile through a well known passage called the "Valley of the Dry Bones." Ezekiel is transported in a vision by God's spirit to a valley graveyard full of bones of his people.

He helps the bones, the Jewish exiles and us remember how God's spirit brings life and hope. Reading now from God's Holy Word.

I'd like to talk this morning about remembering. To begin with, our remembering church last Sunday and its focus on transitions. We continue that theme this morning. We are staying primarily within the Old Testament texts as well, but move forward from the wilderness scenes in the book of Exodus to the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel.

In the year six hundred before the birth of Christ, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem, the city of David, destroyed the Jewish temple of Solomon and took around 10,000 Israelites back to Babylon. Despite that shock and separation, the Jewish exiles in Babylon actually lived pretty well. They were not in the kind of slavery or working conditions that their forefathers had been in in Egypt. In Babylon, the Israelites had many of the freedoms they had at home. Some people did quite well financially. The Babylonians even allowed them to worship their own God.

Yet being in Babylon was still difficult. The Jews tried to remember what it was like to be at home. Things just weren't the same in

Babylon. They missed their city. They missed worshipping in the Temple. They missed the gates and the valleys around Jerusalem. They missed the familiar reminders of their God. What sustained them in Babylon were the memories of God and how they had worshipped back home. But as time began to pass, so did the memories.

So God sent a prophet named Ezekiel to help the people remember who they were in exile. Ezekiel had spent part of his ministry prophesizing about Israel's lack of faith in God. After the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel became a prophet of remembrance, restoration, hope and planning for the future for the Jewish exiles through a series of visions. In one vision, God took Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones. And God asked him, "Mortal, can these bones live? Ezekiel fired back, "O Lord God, you know." Some translate the Hebrew as Ezekiel saying, "Only you know the answer, God" or as "God, you know the answer, why are you asking me?"

You go guy! Ezekiel has attitude. There is a certain playful banter that Ezekiel shows towards God. As if Ezekiel is telling God, "why are you asking me this question, you are God." Ezekiel helps the Israelites in exile remember they are a playful people who wrestle

with God. The name Israel, after all, means he who “wrestles with God.”

God then tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...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.”

God walks Ezekiel through the steps in which bones gain joints, sinews and cartilage. Then they gain skin and then they gain the breath of God and become alive. Coming from an educated, priestly family in Jerusalem, Ezekiel was familiar with how God created life from dust and breath. But here God was making life with bones and skin. It was no doubt a puzzling reminder to Ezekiel that life can come forward in different ways.

I think of the story of the girl who goes to her Mother and asks, “Mom, where did life come from? How did we all get here?” The mom says, “Well honey, first God created Adam and Eve. They had children and here we are.” A few days later she asks her father the same question. The father said, “Well, there were monkeys and gorillas and little by little they became more and more like people

and here we are today.” Confused, the girl went back to her mother and asked, “You said that God created people, but Dad said we came from monkeys. How can this be?” The mother replied, “Honey, I told you about my side of the family. Your father was describing his side of the family.”

The metaphor of the dry bones coming back to life refers to several different kinds of life – physical birth, spiritual birth and spiritual rebirth too. Ezekiel echoes the words of the Psalmist in our first lesson, saying that when God sends forth God’s spirit, we are created. He foreshadows Jesus in John chapter 3 when he talks about our being born again, not physically but spiritually. Ezekiel reminds us of Genesis 2:7 where God’s creation gains life when God’s breath enters it.

Ezekiel reminds us that sometimes we experience valleys in life and our spiritual selves need to be reborn.

The Hebrew in Ezekiel 37 contrasts life with dryness. In the deserts of the arid Middle East before modern irrigation, draught was often as good as death. The people knew dryness and draught in significant ways. But as the prophet Isaiah wrote, they worshipped a God who poured water on the thirsty land, poured streams on dry

ground and poured spirit on Israel's future. So the people associated water and spirit with life and hope.

In that context, the metaphor of dry bones made sense to exiled people who were losing hope for the spiritual life they had back in Israel.

Ezekiel was trying to help them remember and reclaim that spirit.

You might be in a dry period in some part of your life. You might have lost momentum in your career or hope in a relationship.

Yet the God who brought life to the bones in Ezekiel's vision is the Lord who gives us hope for being spiritually alive again today through the living water of Jesus Christ.

This weekend the new Indiana Jones movie opened. I haven't seen it yet so don't tell me how it ends. Near the beginning of the previous Indian Jones movie, *The Last Crusade*, Harrison Ford's title character is brought in by an artifact-chasing mogul to read a sandstone tablet that contains part of John chapter 4 where Jesus proclaims, "Whoever drinks of the water that I give him will never thirst; the water that I

shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Later in John chapter 7 Jesus says, "He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'"

As God had in the Old Testament, Jesus offers water, breath and life to people who lack spirit and who have stopped planning for the future; who feel separated from life.

In God's conversation with Ezekiel after the bones gained flesh and the breath of God, one step still remained – they needed to remember their God.

Our second lesson today has two halves and both halves end with God emphasizing that the bones must know that God is the Lord. Being alive physically does not make the bones complete. They must become alive spiritually by taking in the breath of God and then remembering who God is.

The text says that the bones in Ezekiel's prophecy represent the people of Israel. They were meant to remember in exile that the God

who was present in the temple in their home city was still in their midst in exile. Remembering God would allow them to worship again. By remembering God they could dare to hope again. They could dare to play again. They could begin to plan again for the future.

When God pulled the dry bones together, when the bones were reunited, when they were re-membered, they remembered who God is. And that gave them hope to fully live again.

Being fully alive means to play. Our God is, after all, a God of play. We don't often see that side of God in scripture, but we do in our first lesson. The psalmist sings of the leviathan that "sports" in the water. The best translation of the Hebrew is that God created the sea animal to "frolic" and play in the sea.

Remember that you were a congregation at play last week. You were alive last Sunday. The children had you sitting on the floor and clapping your hands. You remembered your childhood and your sense of play.

Through Ezekiel, God helped the Israelites plan for the future. That is important because that is the place where you as a congregation are now.

In moving to the 10:00 service this morning, we signal that the summer in the church has begun. Sunday school changes. Lunch bunch changes. Your staff is changing. Your interim pastor starts a week from tomorrow and I transition at the end of next month. Your Session has its planning retreat coming up. We have finished Lent, Easter and Pentecost. Starting today, we will be wearing green, the color of spiritual growth and healing, until November. There has been life this past year here but also dry times in this church. One program year is ending and now you begin planning for the next fall, for the next the budget cycle, and for the future.

Like the Israelites, you will need to remember who God has been and is in your midst in order to play together, to pray together, to pull together and to plan together.

Remember that there are ideas in the life of faith that we just know; that we just remember, although we cannot tell where they came from, that sustain and sometimes save us. Traditions handed down in our congregation. Lessons from the Bible we learned in Sunday

school. Prayers we learned as children that help us as adults. I cannot tell you when as a child I learned the Lords' Prayer. But I can tell you that during some tense and scary moments as an adult that remembering that prayer has saved me.

I cannot tell you what happened during my baptism on February 8, 1970, but I can tell you that during our baptisms here I connect with you when we say as part of our liturgy, "let us remember our baptism."

Water can be deadly, as the people of Thailand, Louisiana and Myanmar can attest. Water can also be precious and transforming, as we proclaim in that baptismal liturgy. Our bones are dry without it. And we cannot be truly alive without the spray of God's spirit or without the knowledge of God's presence either.

In the end, no mortal person or program will hold your future. Too often we try to discover the waters of life, like the fountains of youth, by ourselves and we end up even thirstier than before. When we stop trying to find life by ourselves and remember God, we start to remember why it is we followed God to begin with.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. Many of you will remember or may visit the resting places of bones that died for our country, that came before us in faith, and that made a difference in our lives.

Let us remember that God comes to us and through us and gives us life. Let us remember that God is the one who re-members us, pulls us together as a family of faith and gives us hope for our future.

As summer comes, graduations happen, and free time returns, perhaps you'll slow down and remember who you are in faith.

Who you are at play. Who you are in prayer. Who you are in planning for your future.

Who you are in knowing the presence of the living God, the source of the living water flowing from your heart.

The one who you have always known has loved you.

For you just know that in your bones.

Thanks be to God. Amen.