

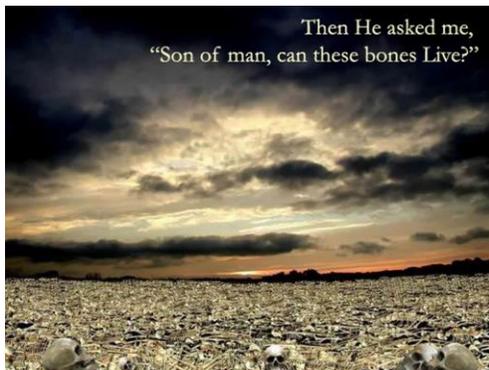
“Bone Dry Hope”

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Ezekiel 37: 1-14

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The passage from Ezekiel is one of my favourite stories in the Bible. I guess that's because it's a story of resurrection. It's a story of incredible despair and hopelessness that is transformed by the breath and Spirit of God into hope and abundant life. It's the story of a promise. And it's a story that reminds us that no matter how things look, there is One who is beyond us who is powerful and personal and who cares deeply for us.

In a vision, God leads the prophet Ezekiel into a valley of dry bones. Then he asks him “Mortal, can these bones live?”



Now remember, this wasn't a valley filled with sick people. It isn't even a valley full of people who, like Lazarus, have just died. When Jesus asked the stone to be removed from where Lazarus was lying, Mary protested, “Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead 4 days”. There was no odour in this valley — these were dry bones – dead for years. Not even parasites could live off of these bones. You can't imagine anything dead, more lifeless.

And yet God asks Ezekiel “Can these bones live?” What a strange question, don't you think? If God asked me “Kim, can these bones live?” I would no doubt have answered: ‘Duh...no, of course not!’ But there is a reason that Ezekiel was a great prophet and I'm not. Ezekiel in his wisdom answers not from his own knowledge, which he knows is limited, but instead draws from God's knowledge, which is limitless. “Mortal, can these bones live” God asks. Ezekiel answers “Lord, you know”. He basically says “What do I know, God? I am just a prophet, you're God”. Ezekiel's faith is big enough that there is room for God in it, but it's not so big that it has room for his ego.

True faith requires humility. True faith is not about having confidence and having all the answers, but rather acknowledging that you don't know and could be wrong. I wonder, if Ezekiel had been a little more like me, and had answered “Of course not, don't be ridiculous”, I wonder....would he even have seen the rest of the vision? Would he have seen the hope and

the life that God was planning to breathe into Israel? I wonder if his vision would have simply ended where it had begun—with dry bones.

I read a quote from F.B. Mayer who said: “*Unbelief puts our circumstances between us and God. But faith puts God between us and our circumstances*”. Don’t close the door on a situation until you’ve brought God into it. Don’t look at a valley of dry bones unless you’re looking through the lens of God.

The vision for Ezekiel was about the people of Israel. Many from the nation had been taken into exile and it felt completely hopeless. They did not think that they could ever be the nation that they were before. They had an incredible past. They were God’s chosen people and they had overcome so much. Think of the famine that brought them to Egypt where Joseph was Pharaoh’s 2nd in command. Think of Moses who led them out of Egypt when the Jewish people had become slaves. Think of the Promised Land. Think of King David and King Solomon. They had a history of greatness, but now they seemed to have no future. All their dreams were gone.

With the exile, Israel felt that who they were—their identity, their purpose, their reason for living—was lost and gone forever. Their dreams were bone-dry.

Have you ever felt that way? I’m guessing you have, whether in a big or small way. The death of a loved one, the loss of a job, the onset of disability or illness – even moving or any life transition can cause our dreams and our sense of identity to die. Sometimes our lives can feel dried up.

I admit I was in that place last spring and summer. After we had reduced our staff at the church and went from two full-time ministers to just me, I kind of thought: “That’s it. This is the beginning of the end. There’s no hope. This church won’t make it. And if a thriving and healthy church like Wall Street can’t make it; what about the rest? (Believe me, this really is a thriving church – there are a lot of dying churches out there; or just plain sick churches where there is no energy left. We’re not one of them, but even with eliminating a full-time staff member, meeting our budget will be squeaky. Costs are going up; this massive building costs a lot to maintain. Our congregation is healthy *and* we’re still struggling.) Still I was in this despair-dry-bones kind of place. And if we can’t make it, what hope is there for the wider church?

Thank God the hopeless feeling did not last. Like Ezekiel (well not exactly like Ezekiel ...in a less spectacular way...) God gave me a new

perspective and gave me new hope. But I'll get back to that in a minute. First I want to tell you about another story of dry bones coming to life.

A couple of weeks ago, on March 14, 2017, I heard an interview on the CBC Radio's *The Current* with Anna Maria Tremonti about a woman who found new life after she met her father's murderer. When Margo Van Sluytman was 16, her father, Theodor, worked at the Hudson's Bay Company in Toronto. It was Easter Monday and the store was closed. Nevertheless he went in on his day off to make sure everything was ready for the big sale that was happening the next day. But that day a group of men decided to rob the Brinks truck transferring money from the store. Things didn't go as the robbers planned and one of them, a man named Glenn Flett, shot and killed her father.

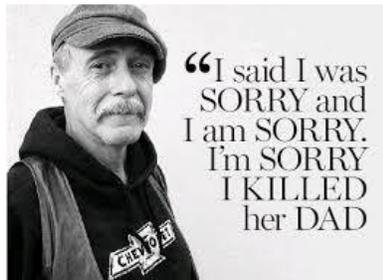
Back at the house when the doorbell rang, it was 16 year-old Margo who answered and saw the two tall police officers who told her the news that their father, who was only 40, had been shot and killed. Their family was beyond devastated. There were 4 children. The father was the main provider for the family. Their mother tried to get by and carry on but within 2 years was suffering from a total mental breakdown. Margo, the daughter, also hit dark and difficult times—she became bulimic, and she attempted suicide. When her mother came to the hospital after her suicide attempt she told her daughter "I have lost my husband. I cannot lose you too". Can any good come from such loss and darkness? Lord, you know.

Meanwhile the killer in prison was in a state of denial. His first encounter with the police was at the age of 7 -- can you imagine? What hope is there for a person who is known to police beginning at age seven?! Though he had never killed anyone before, he was no stranger to violence and violent crime. When he was sentenced for this murder it was not his first time in prison, and much of the violence he witnessed and participated in throughout his life had been in prison. He said he was numb to it. Mortal, can this man live? Mortal, can good come out of this man? Lord you know.

The daughter had lost so much, but somehow, slowly, she emerged from the darkness. One of the things that helped her to heal was writing. She started writing poetry and got involved in therapeutic writing and it made a difference. She started helping others with therapeutic writing and healed some more.

The killer meanwhile was invited one day by a friend to the chapel. A group of Christians was coming from outside the prison and he decided to go along. He had no intention or desire to become a Christian, it was just something to do. But that day, something happened. He had an experience and something changed inside him and he did become a Christian.

Years later, after his release, Glenn's wife made an online donation that she thought was anonymous to the daughter's therapeutic writing project. But the donation was not anonymous, and Margo stopped in her tracks when she saw the name of the donor. With great courage, she contacted her to find out if she was related to her father's killer. In the email to Glenn's wife she also said she needed an apology. This is how Glenn himself responded in an email back: *"Dear Ms. Van Sluytman. I read your words and truthfully I am without words. For so long I have prayed for this moment. Every day I pray that somehow you and your family have been able to move on from the despicable thing I did. Everyday I say I am sorry but it never seems enough. I don't expect you to ever forgive me but I so hope that your wounds are healing . . . I would like you to know that I have put my whole heart into being a different man than I was."*



They began to email back and forth until Margo summoned the strength to make the trip out west to meet him in person. This is how Margo remembers that first encounter: *"I said to him, you must be John Glendon Flett. And he said, Yes. And I said, I am Margot Van Sluytman. And we looked at each other and we started to cry. And we hugged. And we cried for awhile and he said: 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.'*

And I said, I know. I believe you." She and Glenn and Glenn's wife began a very deep and healing friendship.

They now speak together in prisons to the inmates and to the guards to remind each of their humanity. One of the things that they often say is that they have both been in prison since the day her father was killed. And while they don't push their kind of reconciliation on others, they say that it is their friendship which has set them free.



It's been so good starting our *Book of Forgiving* course because I know the new life that can come through learning how to forgive.

Mortal, can these lives begin again?

The obvious answer is "duh... no". It's too late. I'm too far gone. Our problem is that we tend to focus on the problem. Like me looking at a valley of dry bones. If you just focus on and look at the valley, all you're going to see is death, you'll never see anything but death. But if instead of looking at the impossible realities of life, if instead you switch your focus from the problem to God, if you let God answer the question "Can these bones

live?" then you just might be surprised at the answer. If you say "Lord, you know." "Lord, this situation looks impossible, but I don't know ... here, you take it, what do you think?" Then it can take on a whole different perspective.

The only trick, the only hitch is that you have to surrender your idea of a solution, your idea of life, to God. If in faith and humility you hand over your nearly forgotten dream or your impossible situation, then God will bring life. *"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.

Does our church have a future? As I have looked to God and not the valley, the answer I have heard in the last few months is 'yes'. At this point it is not a concrete plan -- it is a vision and a promise, and I have learned that God keeps a promise. Jesus said to Martha: *"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."*

Today God is promising new life to you. Instead of being filled with fear and hopelessness as we look to the future, we will be filled with hope, incredible possibility and life. Let us be open to the possibilities of God. Let us be open to becoming the new creation that God is calling us to be, and to living the life he has called us to live.

Thanks be to God. Amen.