
CREATION TO NEW CREATION

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR A

Colin Dundon

“PILGRIMAGE: FROM SPIRIT TO RESURRECTION.” FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR A

Ezekiel 37.1–14; Psalm 130; Romans 8.6–11; John 11.1–45.

Ezekiel 37.1–14

³⁷The 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. ²He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ ⁴Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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.’

⁷So 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then 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.’ ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then 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.”

¹²Therefore 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord,

when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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.’

This has to be one of the best known of Old Testament texts among Christians and Jews. We know it through a popular African American spiritual (‘Dem bones, dem dry bones’) as well as hearing it read most years in the lectionary at either Lent, Easter or Pentecost. Jewish people read it every year at the sabbath of Passover week in conjunction with Exodus 33.12–34.26, the renewal of the covenant.

We best start from the beginning; the exile in Babylonia. The Judeans are in exile in Babylonia (596–539 BC) and the prophet Ezekiel is among the deportees in 596. He was taken to Nippur, a city south east of Babylon and lives with the exiles. He prophesies from 596–593 and those form the first 32 chapters of his book. Ezekiel receives the news that Jerusalem has finally and utterly fallen in about early 585 BCE. It sets him free to turn from judgment and explanation to restoration and renewal. Chapter 37 fits into that pattern.

The book of Ezekiel addresses a variety of questions arising out of the experience of exile. Why is Israel in exile? Is God unjust? Why could not God protect the land of promise? Is God able to do anything in this situation? Such questions lead to a profound loss of hope: “our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” 37.11. What hope do they have having lost everything they hold dear; land, temple, and the Davidic covenant (Psalm 89)? They lament that they are as good as dead!

Jerusalem’s destruction caused many Judeans to question both the Lord’s power and the feasibility of the Lord’s religion. Why continue to worship a deity who, at the crucial hour was either unwilling or unable to protect his chosen people, the Davidic dynasty and the Temple? Ezekiel is not immune from suffering and grief and suffers these questions with his people. Read Psalm 137 for an expression unmitigated grief, loss, trauma and desire for vengeance.

But Ezekiel believes that God’s deepest desire is to dwell among the people forever 37.26–27. My dwelling place shall be with them. God’s goal, according to Ezekiel is to reconstitute a people whose character corresponds to the holiness of the Lord, and whose identity declares the Lord’s righteousness and justice among the nations.

This moving, evocative passage has two parts, a vision (1–10) and a prophecy of salvation (11–14).

Ezekiel’s experience is a visionary one as indicated by the use of the ‘hand of the Lord’ and the ‘spirit of the Lord’ (1) both depositing the prophet in a valley or field somewhere in Mesopotamia. YHWH leads Ezekiel through the valley full of dry and

desiccated bones. The valley of the dry bones is a battlefield where the bodies have been left to rot unburied; left the ravages of scavengers, eagles, vultures, dogs. Ezekiel is struck by the number and dryness of the bones. So, YHWH puts a rhetorical question to Ezekiel (3a Mortal, can these bones live?) and the expected answer should be a resounding NO. Instead, Ezekiel answers with a YES; it may not have been a resounding yes but Ezekiel always believed that nothing lies beyond YHWH's power or control.

YHWH commands Ezekiel to do what prophets do; prophesy; but to the bones (4–10)! How can dry bones hear the Word of the YHWH? They hear the word of their renewal, their reconstitution in the reverse order to which they decayed; and they hear that God will put spirit in them. Note in this passage the play on the word 'spirit' meaning God's spirit, human life and wind. Don't be confused. Ezekiel is indicating simply that humans only live because of God's spirit and human spirit or life depends on the wind of God. All life flows from God's spirit.

Ezekiel hears the bones coming together and it is almost like an earthquake; very dramatic. But they have no life and the breath of God must come to them from YHWH only then can they live and be a vast number.

What they receive is God's vision of the state of things. In God's vision these dry bones can live because God will restore them to full humanity with a body and enlivened with the Spirit of God. The word of God through the prophet is the means God's vision comes to be.

The word of restoration and salvation (11–14) is a response to the people's utter despair in exile (11 and see 33.10). Their hope has perished (lost) and they are dead and buried (cut off from all life and hope). But YHWH is not limited by limited human vision and promises a return to Israel and the formation of a spirit-enlivened community. Even death is no barrier to a God who raises the dead. Every generation needs to learn to look at its situation through the eyes of God who raises the dead. Every generation needs to learn that these dry bones can live and that the lowest point is the best point to start the lesson.

We have no source within ourselves to create a new future. God's future must come to us.

Questions: Where does your hope lie? Are we a Spirit-enlivened community? Why is the lowest point the best point to start afresh with God's Spirit?

God does not answer the big questions with a theoretical discussion on the human condition or suffering or justice. He offers himself and his Spirit to renew their world. What do you make of that?

Psalm 130

A Song of Ascents.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

O Israel, hope in the Lord!
For with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.

This psalm is the eleventh of the Songs of Ascents probably sung by the pilgrims on their journey to and in Jerusalem. It is also one of the penitential Psalms the church has used in worship since the fifth century CE (Psalms 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; and 143). The reason is the psalm penetrates right to the heart of Scripture: the human predicament and its dependence on divine grace.

The word is a metaphor, an abbreviation of the phrase ‘the depths of the sea’, that brings images to mind of chaotic forces that bring devastation, destruction and death to helpless human beings (1–2). It speaks of drowning in distress, being sucked down by the bottomless waters of trouble (See Psalm 69.1–2). To be in the depths is to be where death prevails instead of life, where all I can cry is “I am lost.”

The psalmist is recalling the Exodus in which the people cried out (Exodus 3.7–9; Isaiah 51.10). As with the ancestors the poet wants freedom and liberation from the chaos of human destructiveness and death and the only recourse is for the psalmist to cry to YHWH and throw himself on God’s mercy.

The second stanza describes what is drowning the psalmist. The writer speaks of iniquities, a common word to designate human alienation from God; the constant human desire to be free from the God who loves us (remember where we started this pilgrimage in our first study). The only hope left is mercy and forgiveness (3–4). Verse 3 makes it clear that the ‘depths’ has to do with the writer’s own sinfulness and are not someone else’s doing (as in Psalm 129). Even in that situation the psalmist will dare to call on God for help, not out of any sense of pride or privilege but out of humility and

helplessness. The chaotic forces unleashed by the psalmist's sin have driven his life to destruction, devastation and death. The poet believes that God does not keep a strict tally of sins (mark iniquities) because the Exodus story tells him that God will be gracious, God will forgive and God will renew the covenant relationship and his covenant love will never cease (Exodus 32–34; especially 34.6–7; also Nehemiah 9.17). This is God's essential character and it is why YHWH is revered.

As the only hope is God's word speaking of forgiveness and hope the poet waits, and waits and waits until, like the sun, it finally breaks forth in glory and light dispelling the darkness (5–6). He waits for God's time of restoration and renewal in his life. Waiting is not about thinking that God needs time to make up God's mind but waiting with anticipation to see what new thing God will work out of the renewal of forgiveness. It is trust that finds strength and courage now in the certainty of what is yet to be. Waiting is a way of being and trusting, drawing its strength from God's future which the Gospel reading below will explore.

The psalmist has written the poem in the first person so far but now he calls on the whole of Israel to pay attention. Out of that experience the psalmist encourages the rest of Israel to find hope in God and seek God's offer of freedom from the chaos of sin (7–8). The psalmist will not let the good news of hope and mercy be confined to private experience but must see it played out in the national arena too. God's future of renewal and hope is for all. As Christians the Gospel will expand that to include the whole creation in that hope that waits for the future of the Risen One, the Crucified One.

This psalm has influenced the church for 2,000 years as one of the penitential psalms and helped shape lives like that of Martin Luther and John Wesley. Its message that nowhere and no-one is beyond the loving, forgiving redeeming presence of God creates a powerful assurance for those who take its message seriously.

Questions: Do you live trusting that God is moved, responsive to and affected by human cries from the depths? Meditate on the psalmist's trust that God's sovereignty is not an exercise of force but the power of committed, faithful love. How does that speak to your life?

Waiting is part of the Christian life. What do you think waiting means? How do you respond to waiting? How can it help in our spiritual journey?

Romans 8.6–11

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If 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.

This tiny portion is an extract from 8.1–11, which is itself the very heart of the argument of Romans 5–8. Even this snippet should begin at verse 5.

For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.

Setting the tone, verses 5–6 argue that those who are according to the flesh (NRSV has ‘live according to the flesh’ but that is not what Paul says) have a certain way of thinking and desiring’ and those who walk according to the Spirit have an entirely different way of thinking and desiring. The word translated ‘mind’, means what one concentrates on, what one is devoted to, one’s outlook and aspirations; in other words what a person desires that that it is their prime thought. One way of thinking and desiring leads to death and the other way leads to life and peace. Paul emphasises what he calls the mind as the initial, and transformative, point of renewal (Romans 12.1–2 different word, same idea). The mind for Paul is the inner workings of thinking, desiring and imagination that create the stories that we live by. It is not the limited vision of rationality that we have inherited.

The flesh will create one sort and the Spirit another. Flesh for Paul does not mean body but human life that takes no account of God. It is human life that can find no place for God in its aspirations, thinking, desires or imagination. Logically, because it will not align itself with God’s will (law), refuses the claim of God on its life and imagination (does not submit) it is hostile to God and cannot please God. Human life that takes no account of God ends in death. In contrast the human life absorbed by the Spirit means life and peace (7–8).

Paul then addresses his readers as being in the Spirit and on that basis they are assured of resurrection (9–11). To read these verses with some clarity we need to note that Paul switches bewilderingly between describing Christians as being in the Spirit and the Spirit being in them (see the same kind of switches in Ezekiel 37) and the terms he uses to denote the indwelling Spirit move between ‘the Spirit’, ‘the Spirit of God’, ‘the Spirit of Christ’ or simply ‘Christ’. Remember, Paul is thinking this out for the first time in Christianity. No one has carved out this territory before him, so it is exciting to read this as though we are looking over Paul’s shoulder for the first time and wondering where he will go next.

Verse 9 states the case clearly. The Christian is someone in whom the Spirit of God lives and who is one of Messiah’s people in possession of Messiah’s Spirit or, better

still, whom the Spirit possesses. Without that Spirit they have no place in Messiah's people. The Christian's body is still subject to death and decay under the regime of sin but because of Messiah's saving death and resurrection (justification or righteousness; 5.21) the Spirit gives new life that survives the other side of death in resurrection. The Spirit in the Christian is the same who raised Messiah from the dead giving him a resurrection body and that is the Christian's certainty- a body enlivened by the Spirit suitable for resurrection life.

Questions: Where is your mind concentrated? What are your aspirations? Do you really believe what verse 10 says? What effect does that have on the way you live? You are what you love. What do you make of that?

John 11.1–45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, 'Lord, he whom you love is ill.' ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, 'This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.' ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, 'Let us go to Judea again.' ⁸The disciples said to him, 'Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?' ⁹Jesus answered, 'Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them.' ¹¹After saying this, he told them, 'Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' ¹²The disciples said to him, 'Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right.' ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him.' ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

¹⁷When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. ¹⁸Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, ¹⁹and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. ²⁰When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. ²¹Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. ²²But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ²³Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' ²⁴Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' ²⁵Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, ²⁶and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' ²⁷She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

²⁸When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, 'The Teacher is here and is calling for you.' ²⁹And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. ³⁰Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. ³¹The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. ³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' ³⁷But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.' ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, 'Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?' ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, 'Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.' ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Delay, dialogue, debate, despair and disappointment weave their way through this story of the raising of Lazarus. Reading the story we sense that this is the turning point in Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

Three new characters appear (1–6); Lazarus who is ill, Mary and Martha. Jesus is away from Jerusalem and across the Jordan where John had once baptised. The sisters contact him and Jesus decides to stay two days longer not going to his loved ones when they need him. He will show his love for the family in a way that will glorify God and contribute to the glorification of the Son of Man.

Jesus then decides to return to Judaea (7–16) and the disciples protest because of the hostility and Jesus responds to their fears with reminders of his teaching at Tabernacles (7.1–10.21) about walking in light and not the dark. The disciples must walk in the light and with the light and not be like the Pharisees who walk in the dark. As always the conflict with his enemies flows through the story disturbing its serenity and hope.

Still, Lazarus is on his mind and once again the disciples interpret Jesus' words literally and miss the point. Jesus must be blunt and plain. Thomas agrees to go to Jerusalem

with him, but with a sense of despair. Jesus will not skulk about in the dark but will do the work of God openly.

By the time Jesus arrives Lazarus is well dead and decaying (17–27). Martha is energetic, a firm believer in her own grasp on things and Jesus must wrest the narrative from her. She has made up her mind about Jesus and the nature of resurrection even though she confesses (27) that confession is like those of Nicodemus', the Samaritan woman, Nathaniel; traditional Jewish messianic expectations. They do not penetrate to the heart of Jesus true work and identity. The key verses are 25–27 as they are most far-reaching promise in this Gospel of what the relationship with Jesus offers those who embrace it.

The promise of the resurrection as stated here is not embedded in some future event. It can never be assimilated to reincarnation. Jesus announces that the resurrection life is available in him now. Jesus shares in God's life-giving mission as its source, not as an ancillary. As the resurrection and the life Jesus defeats the power of death in the future and the present.

Mary hears Jesus' voice through Martha and goes to him, and her compatriots accompany her and continue the expected cultural grieving practices. All focus on the dead Lazarus rather than on the light of the world and Jesus is deeply disturbed (33). Even Mary cannot see. Jesus' tears (a different word) reflect not his sorrow at the loss of Lazarus (why would they?) but his deep sorrow that no-one believes his revelation of the light: Even his nearest and dearest stumble in the dark.

Jesus raises Lazarus from death (38–44). Jesus deep sorrow is expressed in 38–42. He must express his relationship with the Father in a public way to make the light as clear as possible; he is the sent one, whose word has the power over death, who reveals the glory of God and is glorified by God. This breaks all the bounds of traditional categories of belief.

The reading finishes on a welcome note of trust by some Pharisees but we need to read on (46–53) to know that a turning point has been reached, and a policy to destroy Jesus for political and social reasons now comes into play.

Death is named as the greatest threat to the relationship with God and in its place are no idle words of a fatuous hope but the irrevocable promise of life with God. Death is denied power over our life with God.

Questions: The questions throughout this story are the same as those in Ezekiel, 'Can God raise the dead?' Can these dead bones live? Can they? Is God the God of life or is God defeated by death? Can the life of God erupt into the everyday life of human beings? How have you experienced that?