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**Caring for God's Creation: Dry Bones**  
Ezekiel 37:1-14

The mountains and land in and around Yosemite National Park are covered with trees: massive pines, firs, and redwoods – most of them protected as National Forest. Hiking and camping there with my husband Dary almost a decade ago, it was easy to envision John Muir sauntering through the woods with his canteen and his log book, bathing in the quiet green of the trees and climbing the harsh angles of the granite. At the turn of the last century, Muir was a tireless advocate for the creation of national parks to protect the wildness and beauty of nature. He said, “few are altogether deaf to the preaching of pine trees. Their sermons on the mountains go to our hearts; and if people in general could be got into the woods, even for once, to hear the trees speak for themselves, all difficulties in the way of forest preservation would vanish.”<sup>1</sup>

The trees are bigger out there, and older. Some species – whitebark and ponderosa pines, firs, and junipers, live for many hundreds of years. Some giant sequoias live for several thousand – some as old or older than Christianity itself. I've rested my cheek on a tree that was rooted in that place before California became a state in 1850, before Columbus even thought of crossing the Atlantic, before Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus. Knowing the age of those trees, then, when we returned five or six years later, we were troubled to find that many of the pines seem to have died. They were still standing, straight and tall and massive, but instead of green their needles were brown – every third tree, in some places. A tinderbox of dried out trees filling the mountainside around the park.

The National Forest Service estimates that some 18 million trees died in California last year due to drought and an infestation of bark beetles. 147 million have died since 2010. These are trees that have stood for a century or more, taxed to their limit by the drought, heat, and insect assault of the last

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<sup>1</sup> Muir, John, "The National Parks and Forest Reservations," Speech published in *Sierra Club Bulletin*, (1896), v. 1, no. 7, January 1896, pp 271-284, at 282-83.  
[https://vault.sierraclub.org/john\\_muir\\_exhibit/writings/favorite\\_quotations.aspx](https://vault.sierraclub.org/john_muir_exhibit/writings/favorite_quotations.aspx)

nine years. A single spark from a lightning strike or a stray cigarette will light a massive wildfire, the destructive power of which we saw last season, with whole towns wiped off the map.

Now, we're lucky. I'm lucky, I should say. I've never lived through the kind of death and destruction the prophet Ezekiel did. Ezekiel was writing as an exile, prophesying to the other Israelites who had survived much warfare, who carried the grief of losing their homeland daily, going through the motions of existence somewhere they never wanted to be, weeping by the rivers of Babylon. So I'm lucky. I've never survived a siege as Jerusalem did for two years before falling to Babylon. I've never seen a battle, much less walked over bodies in a battlefield, never been driven out of my home into exile. I've never seen a valley of bones.

But there are plenty of people in the world today who have. Refugees from wars in Syria, Yemen, and the Sudan. Refugees from ethnic cleansing in Myanmar and governmental collapse in Venezuela. Refugees from gang violence and climate change in Honduras and Guatemala and El Salvador – people uprooted from their lives, cut off from their communities, in some cases their homes and livelihoods destroyed. Looking out at the millions of people migrating for safety, huddled at our borders, crowded into refugee camps, one wonders: can these bones live?

Even in this country – former residents of Paradise, which was decimated by the Camp fire, are struggling. Some still owe mortgage payments on houses that don't exist; others have no choice but to return even though there's no potable water, no infrastructure, no hospital, no schools. "I feel like it's watching slow death, you know, it's just, it's death on top of death," one resident said. "It's getting to me."<sup>2</sup> They must walk through their neighborhood and wonder, can these bones live?

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<sup>2</sup> Staip, Mary, qtd in "'When will this end?' Months after Camp Fire, living in Paradise still feels like 'everybody's in crisis,'" Ashlyn Rollins, The Mercury News, 7/7/19, <https://www.mercurynews.com/2019/07/07/when-will-this-end-months-after-camp-fire-stress-mounts-for-those-who-returned-to-paradise/>.

Now that I think about it, we find ourselves in valleys of bones all the time. A job is lost and a family wonders how they will manage to keep their apartment and pay medical bills – they’re in the valley.

After divorce, a person wonders how they will ever find a new normal again. They’re in the valley.

A widowed spouse is weighed down by grief at the diner table, missing their best friend and companion, and the pasta she always made. They’re in the valley.

Every third tree dead from drought, 107 million in the past three years – the Sierra Nevada mountain range is a valley of dry bones!

Watching the news or scrolling through a newsfeed, with reports that show how racism, nationalism, and xenophobia are defining our government’s policies and putting children in cages without so much as a blanket for comfort – we are in the valley. Can these bones live? Will these bones ever live again?

God’s question to the prophet is rhetorical, right? We know the answer ... it seems obvious. No! Skeletons don’t reanimate! Zombies are the brainchild of fiction writers and b-grade movies. The dead stay dead, most of the time... Can these bones live? and yet, Ezekiel, who has survived more death and destruction than we could imagine doesn’t say NO. Instead the prophet, well, he hedges. Some might say he holds onto hope. “Lord God, you know...” he says, then he waits for God’s response and direction.

Lord God, you know.

The word Ezekiel uses for God, YHWH is interesting. Some say it’s unpronounceable, and without vowels, as the Biblical Hebrew originally was, it is – it just comes out as breath – YHWH. But maybe that was intentional. Maybe the ancient image of God as breath, God as close and lifegiving as the air in our lungs and the wind at our backs – is right, an apt description. YHWH. And that’s exactly what God tells Ezekiel to do – to take a breath, and to speak, and to call to the Spirit, the ruach, to breathe life into those bones again.

And so the prophet does. He speaks and the bones knit back together. He calls to the Spirit and the bones live, a vast multitude brought back to life by the power of God.

Ezekiel is telling the Israelites, whose bones are dried up, whose hope is lost, who feel completely cut off from all they knew and loved: Don't give up! God sees you! And God is a God of life! God's Spirit blows through dry and dusty valleys and brings the renewing rains of spring. God's Spirit can draw faith out of doubt, hope from despair, and life out of death!

Look at the architecture of our faith: our faith hangs ideas of redemption, renewal, reconciliation, recreation, resurrection – this is the work of the God of life, continuing to create and recreate us and the world around us. That is why the prophet, surrounded by death and destruction and decay doesn't give in to despair! He holds onto hope, so when God asks, Mortal, can these bones live, he can say: Lord God, YOU KNOW: YES THEY CAN.

There are certain kinds of trees – the Jack pine, and the Lodgepole pine, a few others -- whose resilience is an inspiration. The pinecones of these trees are incredibly sturdy, tightly closed, and filled with thick sap. Those cones stay closed most of the time. They are built strongly enough to withstand extreme heat – like the heat from a forest fire. When a fire blows through, it melts the sap in those cones and causes them to open... that means these pines are pioneer species – among the first plants to take root and grow in the aftermath of a forest fire. They have adapted and survive what seems like the worst thing that could happen to a forest.

But fires are nature's way of creating healthy forests – they are “the way by which a forest is continually regenerated”<sup>3</sup> by clearing out underbrush, and making way for a diversity of species to take root.

Don't get me wrong – the fires that have raged in the western US in the past few years are unprecedented in size and destructive power. Human development in fire prone areas adds fuel and risk. Development, along with drought, higher temperatures, and millions of dead trees, mean that fires will continue to be more common, and more severe. And the death and destruction of old-growth forests is a tremendous loss, in many ways

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<sup>3</sup> Herring, David, “Evolving in the Presence of Fire,” 11/1/99, earthobservatory.nasa.gov.

devastating for the whole planet. But when the ground cools, and nature is left to its own devices – new trees take root. The earth regenerates!

Some scientists and environmental advocates believe trees are key to averting the climate catastrophe – planting 1 trillion trees could reverse a decade of carbon emissions by drawing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and helping to cool the planet. It's incredible that YHWH, who breathed life into us – YHWH, whose very name itself is a breath, an inhalation and an exhalation, YHWH had the wisdom to cover our world with plants that scrub the air of CO<sub>2</sub> and give back oxygen, exactly what we need to breathe. Exactly what we need to survive.

Our theme this week is recreation – God's constant work of renewing and remaking the world into how God means for it to be. And our task, as people of faith, is to have hope that no matter the valleys where we find ourselves – either as individuals, or as a state, nation, or world – Don't give up. God sees us. and ultimately, God is a God of life, drawing faith out of doubt, hope from despair, and life out of death.

Can these bones live?

You know.