

# **CAN THESE BONES LIVE?**

## **Part 4: Linking with the Spirit**

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**Camrose United Church**  
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Ezekiel 37:1-10 - Prophecy to the breath

Romans 8: 1-17 - We have received a Spirit of adoption

Thank you, choir; your anthem was exciting. We're kind of having a post-dated Pentecost here today, I guess, with the theme of the Spirit coming up. Of course, it's also the fourth in a five-part series that Mary Ann and I are doing, called "Can These Bones Live?" It's our attempt to express something of our vision, of our different parts of vision, for the church. We chose to talk about linking; our vision of what it takes for the church to truly be alive is to be linked in four key ways. One is to be linked to each other, related closely to one another's hearts; the second is to be linked to our history, our story, our heritage; the third is to be linked to our context, the world around us. And today I'm talking about being linked to the Spirit. If those four links--relationships--are strong it is our conviction that the church will thrive, will truly be what God is calling us to be as a church in this time and place. Incidentally, the fifth in the series, next week, is the concluding part in which Mary Ann and I are going to try something we haven't done before. It's not a sermon; it's going to be a message in dialogue form between the two of us. We often get into conversations about the church and what we feel and what we really care about, and we think "Gee, it would be neat if the congregation could listen in on this and hear some of the thoughts." What you would hear is not just one set of ideas; you would hear two somewhat different sets of ideas pushing each other. We're hoping to let you catch a bit of that in the dialogue next week on "risk and empowerment."

As you know, we've been using the Ezekiel story of the valley of dry bones throughout the five-part series, adding a little bit more to the reading each time. So far, we've had that initial part of the reading--the image of the dry bones which was ancient Israel. We can translate the things about ancient Israel into truths and insights about the church. Ezekiel is a prophet who sees ancient Israel as having dried up like a valley of dry bones, and there is this question, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel says to God "I don't know. Only you know that." Then God says, "Prophecy to these bones." And so Ezekiel prophesies to the bones--speaks to them. Then there's a response to that powerful word of God. You know, the bones joined to the bones, and the sinews, and the skin, and you get this wild fantasy metaphor of all these dry bones taking on a complete physical form. Then comes the really pointed part of the story. There they are, complete bodies with breath and blood and sinews and skin, but they are not alive. Then God has to say "Prophecy again; this time prophecy to the breath--to the Spirit." "Breath" and "Spirit" are the same word in Hebrew--ruah, a beautiful word, ruah. Prophecy to the ruah, which is that breath of life that is the Spirit that makes the difference between a mere hollow physical shell and a truly vibrant living being. That's what we're talking about now. Prophecy to the Spirit, to the breath of life, and call to the four winds, the

four breaths, the four Spirits, to come and enter. And sure enough it does. The bones stand and they live and they are a vast multitude.

I want to talk both about how life at times dries up for us individually, for us as a church, for communities, for society; and about how the Spirit at times enters in and revitalizes and brings life in a new way. That is so central to our whole understanding or grasp of what it is to live in Christ, to truly live. It's a very personal kind of thing for all of us, and I say that not in the sense of being private, but in the sense that it takes a different form for everyone. We need to share those stories and hear them from each other

I want to talk about how the Spirit has moved in my life. In order to do that I need to tell you some more about what's happening in my life right now. I need to take a moment to be somewhat personal with you. Just a month ago my wife and I separated. Many of you know that, because I've talked to several of you, but I haven't taken an opportunity to actually talk to the whole congregation about that. That's important for a couple of reasons. One, maybe the most important, is that the relationship of a minister, of a pastor, to the congregation is really the heart of the ministry, and in order for that relationship to be open and trusting, I need to be open and honest with you. I need to say that, and I need to tell you a little bit about it--not a lot--but just to let you know that I have a lot of respect for my wife. However, we've struggled with issues in our relationship for many, many years. We've had some hopeful times and we've had some discouraging times. We've put a lot of effort into struggling with the relationship, and I've put a lot of work into soul searching about me. We finally came to the decision over the past year that we need to be separate. We're both still living in Camrose, our boys live with both of us--back and forth--and we're just working that out. If anyone wants to say something, or ask something, or talk with me about it I'm very open to that. I want you to know, too, that many of the people whom I have informed have come and talked to me and have been very supportive. I feel very warmly embraced and supported throughout this time. This is an opportunity that I'm taking to say that, mainly because my relationship with you as a congregation needs to be open and honest so that those things can be talked about. I mention it particularly in this case, also, because I want to talk about how the Spirit moves in our lives, and I need to be able to refer to things like this that happen in my life because what I want to share with you today about the Spirit is how the Spirit is moving in my life right now.

The experience of coming to the end of a marriage is a breaking experience for me; it's a shattering experience. Through the soul-work that I've done, much of how I've approached my life, especially my relationships, has really crumbled. I've come to a place where I have felt like a really broken person in many ways, and like I say, I've also had tremendous support from people in that. But those go together. There's some way in which I also want to say to you that in the experience of coming through that breaking, that separating, there's also an amazingly wonderful, thrilling, enlivening, part of that. It's because the breaking is a breaking open, and in that breaking open I have opened my heart to people in a way that I haven't before. It's amazing to me the people that God has sent to be with me in so many different, wonderful ways, and the opening of life and vitality and passion that comes from it. It's part of a pattern in life.

There are times when we get broken open, painfully broken, and yet the breaking open also opens us to life in a new way and makes it possible for the Spirit to flow through us. There are so many ways in which we shut down and build shells around us individually, or as organizations or in many different ways, and those shells keep out life, they keep out the Spirit. There's a way in which the Spirit moves in life when we break open. No, I want to say that differently. It's not that the Spirit moves when we are open; the Spirit always moves. It's that when we are open, whether we break open or however we open, we move with the Spirit. That's my experience--not that the Spirit waited for me to open up before starting to move, but that the Spirit is always moving, and as I open up I start to be able to move with the Spirit. I don't know where the Spirit is taking me or leading me, but the exciting part is that relationship with the Spirit that allows me to follow out of a deep, deep sense of trust. You've got to move when the Spirit says move, and you can move, and even if it's terrifying where you're moving to, there's a deep kind of trust in that relatedness, in that linkedness, with the Spirit.

In the reading from Romans Paul talks about a relationship with the Spirit. He talks about the difference between flesh and Spirit. I don't think flesh just means being degenerate. I think it means the external shell of life, the bodies in the valley of dry bones when the entire body was put together but still wasn't alive. Or we as a church can have a wonderful sense of God's Spirit in our midst, and then build an institution around that, and get organizations and structures and policies all in place and working smoothly, and we can come to the point where we shut out the Spirit. We over-institutionalize our spiritual life, or we try to institutionalize our relationships, and that's because there's some moment when life is just there, so vibrant and so wonderful that we want to hang on to it. But we try to hang on to it in a way that kills it. So we need to get broken open again and again and again, and that's what the Spirit does in our lives. Paul in the Romans passage says we need to understand that this is a Spirit of adoption. We're not servants or slaves of God; we're not being directed through life like a set of stop lights and traffic signs that just tell us where to go without any concern for who we are. We're talking about one who adopts us, makes us the children of the Holy One. This is one who knows you, knows your heart, knows your soul and cares so deeply about who you are, and challenges you, breaks you when you need to be broken, pushes you when you need to be pushed, loves you and holds you and encourages you, and empowers you when you need that, and takes you you have no idea where, but gives you that deep sense of trust to follow, to follow willingly, to follow gladly in the promise of the inheritance, being adopted as a child of the household, being loved and cared for as a child of God, and being the inheritor of this divine heritage.

The Spirit moves like that in our lives and in our midst, and it's the Spirit moving in our lives and our openness to that, our trust in that movement of the Spirit, that adoption sort of linking to the Spirit, being in relationship with the Spirit, not just living according to some beliefs and ideas but being really related to the Spirit. Far more than believing in the Holy Spirit is knowing the Holy Spirit, living in loving, deep, passionate, relationship with the Spirit. That's the link. And for Mary Ann and me the vision for the church is to rediscover, to reopen ourselves as a church to that intimate related link to the Holy Spirit that will give us the trust to follow as a church wherever the Spirit leads. And so those bodies in the valley of dry bones, even though the bones aren't dry any more--there's blood and there are sinews but no life--will come to life, will come to vibrant and full life

once again by calling to the breath of life, calling to the Spirit, opening ourselves as individuals, as families, as church, as society to that divine ruah to enter in and to bring life to its fullest.

Transcribed by Sue and By Reesor