

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the one who brings our dry bones back to life, Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord, amen.

Anyone remember the hit song recorded by Bill Haley and the Comets back in 1954 called, “Shake, Rattle, and Roll?” their version was the most popular, but it was originally recorded by Big Joe Turner a Blues singer and a couple of months later by the King himself, Elvis Presley. Shake Rattle and Roll has been listed by Rolling Stone Magazine as their 127th of the top 500 Rock and Roll songs of all time. Almost 70 years later some of us old rockers still like to shake, but we do a lot more rattling when we rock and roll...

Not even Big Joe Turner can take credit for the debut of this distinctive shaking, rattling and rolling sound. Going back way more than 70 years, we find the prophet Ezekiel in exile in the city of Babylon. This happened more than 500 years before the birth of Christ. While in captivity, the prophet sees seven visions, which include messages of judgment against Judah, messages of judgment against the other nations of the world and promises of future blessings for the people of Judah. Sadly, chapter 37 of Ezekiel begins in a lifeless place. Bones... Dry bones... No signs of life... No dancing to the rock 'n' roll drumbeat. Only death and wasteland.

Into the wasteland of our lives God asks us, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

I know I’ve had days, weeks, maybe even months at a time when it sure didn’t seem possible that these bones would ever live again. The bones are so dry. Maybe not in the physical sense, but I’ve been through times when my bones were certainly spiritually dry. I’m not alone in this either. According to the organization, Mental Health in America, over 47 million Americans are living with mental health issues. I know mental illness is not the same as Spiritual illness, but I believe there is a correlation. In the United States as the number of people who claim some type of religious affiliation decreases and the people who check None of the Above on surveys about their religious affiliation increases it just seems obvious to see the corresponding rise in Mental illness. There may not be a direct cause and effect between what people claiming on some form about their religious practices and the increase in mental illness, but there can be no doubt there is something connecting the two.

To be clear, I’m not saying that if a mentally ill person starts attending a Church then their illness will disappear. On the other hand, a close relationship with the Lord can sometimes give those who suffer from mental illness a solid foundation to help them when their demons begin to manifest. People who are addicted to alcohol and narcotics often are able to remain sober due to the help of their “Higher Power,” as it’s called in the AA Ten Step Program Even as I say

these words I know I'm guilty of interpreting this ancient prophesy through my modern, western context. This story is not about any one person or even about us as a congregation. Ezekiel was given these words from God in order to comfort the beleaguered and defeated people of Judah. The rebellion in Jerusalem had been squashed and almost everyone taken into exile some 1500 miles away in Babylon. Ezekiel, unlike Jeremiah, whom we heard from last week was taken to Babylon with the others in exile. Prior to his deportation Ezekiel was a fire and brimstone, finger pointing prophet who continually warned the people of Judah their sinful ways would not be tolerated by God forever and that eventually God's wrath would rain down on them for their sin. The people refused to listen. They told Ezekiel their God would never abandon them. After all God lives in the temple built by Solomon. Since our God is the most powerful God in the universe, we are safe from all our enemies. They had some pretty good precedent to back them up. About a hundred years earlier the Assyrian army had laid siege to Jerusalem. At that same time, they handily defeated the northern tribes, but their plans to defeat Judah and Jerusalem failed because God sent a plague through the Assyrian army. They were forced to withdraw and return to their home leaving Judah and the beautiful city of Jerusalem intact, for now. As you can imagine this made the Judeans pretty sure of themselves and so they ignored all the prophets that God sent to them telling them to repent and return to the Lord their God.

So, if I'm going to faithfully interpret this prophesy for us today I have to ask in what ways is the Church in need of repentance? I can't answer that question because I'm a Pastor and a leader in the Church. When I or other leaders claim to know God's will or claim to exclusively know the truth, I'm reminded that Jesus often criticized the Jewish Temple leaders, the Scribes, Pharisees, and the Sadducees for claiming to know God's will and God's truth. So, I'm not the best one to try to answer that question. We need another Martin Luther to help us see what and where the Church is in need of reform today. Also, if I'm being faithful to the proper interpretation of this story of dry bones living again, I can't help but notice this as being a foretaste of the resurrection of the dead that will happen when Jesus returns. All the dry bones that have laid in the grave for far too long will one day breathe the breath of life once again. They will sing and dance and rejoice for what was once dead and gone will live again! I think that's the best news we can get for the people of Judah in exile, for the people today who feel the Church is nothing more than dried up old irrelevant dead bones. God has not abandoned the Church and God has not abandoned you.

I noticed that once Judah had fallen and Jerusalem was destroyed, Ezekiel changed his message. The Word of God that was given to Ezekiel before the fall of Jerusalem was one of repentance from your evil ways, but after the fall, God's Word went from predicting doom and gloom and utter devastation, to one of a

much more positive, encouraging, and comforting nature. Yes the people had strayed far from God. They had gone so far as to worship the Assyrian and Babylonian gods right inside the very temple Solomon had built for their God YHWH. Imagine how that must have been so offensive to the Lord. The religious leaders allowed and probably participated in pagan rituals that often-involved sexual relations right inside the very walls of the Holiest place on earth. Is it any wonder God pulled out of that kind of relationship with the remnant of his very own “Chosen “people?

Then, sometime during their 70 years in exile God had a change of heart. God remembered the covenant He made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God remembered his servant David and how God loved David, despite David’s sin with Bathsheba. God remembered how much He loved His people. That’s why the message Ezekiel had from God changed. It wasn’t so much they were suffering in exile, or they had somehow changed their sinning, evil ways. It was because God remembered just how much He loved them. So, God sends this very graphic message through Ezekiel to His people. Your exile will not last forever. Soon enough I, the Lord, your God will make your dry bones live again!

What a great message for all of us who feel tired and worn out this holiday season! What a great message for all of us who still grieve and mourn our deceased loved ones! God knows your pain and God has a plan for your welfare

and not for your continued suffering. God's salvation is near. Trust in the Lord, your God and live! God has won the victory over sin, death, and the devil! With that victory in hand, God will raise all the dry bones to new life and they will live again in glory and fully forgiven for all our sins by God our creator.

May this message bring you not only comfort, but peace this holiday season. Knowing God will not allow our current suffering to continue forever and that our dry bones will once again breathe the breath of life that can only come from God. May the coming birth of our Savior be that breath of life that comes straight from God to you this holiday season. Wait! What's that sound I hear? Can it be the sound of shaking? No. It sounds more like rattling... May all our bones begin to shake, rattle and roll once again! For the Lord, your God will make all our dry bones to live again! Amen.