

DREAMS THAT TAKE ON LIFE:
Can These FBC Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Dr. Doyle Sager, First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, Missouri

April 3, 2016

AUDIO: <http://fbcjc.buzzsprout.com/7678/368850-dreams-that-take-on-life-can-these-fbc-bones-live>

Most of you know that we have been in a time of discernment here at FBC JC, seeking God's future for our church. Through many hours of congregational prayer and listening, we have established five big dreams: 1) God-centered worship; 2) Life-changing faith; 3) Authentic relationships; 4) Community transformation; 5) Global partners. But that's the easy part. How do we move from dreams to deeds? How do dreams take on life? That's our concern in this brief sermon series.

The prophet Ezekiel has some insight for us, in the valley of dry, bleached, brittle bones. On this first Sunday after Easter, it figures that we have to go to a scene of death in order to understand new life. Ezekiel had the sad distinction of preaching to the exiles, during twenty-plus years of pain. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The people were led away captive. All hope seemed lost. "Disorientation" was the word. They were in need of some God-sized dreams. God asks the prophet, "Can these bones live?" I love it that Ezekiel, very human, struggles to know how to answer ("If I push button one, 'yes,' I foolish; if I push 'no,' I show a lack of faith..."). So he answers, "God, you go first! Only you know, Lord!" Good, safe answer!

God's answer was the miracle...bones rattling, coming together, muscle, tendon, flesh, skin. And then breath. New life! What a powerful lesson!

As v. 11 makes clear, this word was addressed to the people of God. All through history, the people of God have endured valleys of dry bones. We've had them here at FBC, those times of tension between despair and hope, between death and life. During the Civil War, our church was caught up in the conflict, and as far as we know, didn't meet during those troubling times. Can these bones live? In 1987, our brand new sanctuary was burned to the ground in a tragic Sunday evening fire. Can these bones live? Yet, as in the prophet's vision, God breathed and the bones took on life.

In my study Bible, in the margin of this Ezekiel 37 text, I have a note written: "The best set-up for a miracle is the place where it looks most impossible." Yes, God is leading us into God's future, but we can't do this by ourselves.

1) We can't do this without God's Word. First, Ezekiel preached to the bones (vv. 4, 7), then to the wind/breath/Spirit (vv.9-10). It was out of preaching that life came. No church or individual can be any stronger than its capacity to hear God. I would go even further. This church's capacity to adapt and survive is directly related to your courageous ability to hear God and obey.

2) We can't do this--move into God's future--without God's Spirit. In Ezekiel's experience, even when the bones came together, the Spirit had to give them life (breath). Isn't this a picture of coming to faith? We need God's Word to show us our lostness, our dishonesty, our sin. Then we need God's Word to show us what Christ did for us, and how much God loves us. And how trusting him can save us. But even at a congregational level, all our programs and strategies are just human effort without God. Without the Holy Spirit, we are Rotary Club with a steeple or United Way with the Lord's Prayer thrown in.

3) We can't do this--move into God's future--without each other. One miracle in this text is the coming alive; the other is coming together (v. 7). Note that the promise of God is not to raise an arm or an eye ball, or a tiny cluster of cells, but to raise a body. We need each other. We can't do it alone. We aren't supposed to! Our Western bent is to interpret everything in scripture individualistically. But much of it is communally received. Faith to move mountains--not just my faith, our faith. Forgiving seventy time seven? On days I can't do that, can you help me?

I love the story in Mark 2 about the four men who carried the paralyzed man to Jesus. But the doorway was blocked by people. So they let him down from the roof. Jesus said, "Their faith (not the lame man's) made you whole." And have you noticed? We're like a volleyball team. We change positions. Sometimes, I'm one of the carriers; other days, I need to be carried.

We can't do this unless we do this together, with God's Word, with God's Spirit.

Can these bones live? O Lord God, you know!