

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa**  
**Sunday, March 29 2020 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Reading: Ezekiel 37**

**Sermon: Spirit Within You (Lent 5)**

I think last week Steve mentioned the news story about the priest who, in this time of livestream worship and physical separation, asked his congregation to send in digital photos of themselves and their families. Then he proceeded to print and tape those photos to the pews, so that when he looked out at the empty church, instead he would see smiling faces looking back at him.

Of course it didn't take long for memes about "church tradition" to take over. One person sent in a comment saying: "It's a dream congregation, they can't talk back!" Someone else said: "Father, you put someone else in my pew! You know I always sit on the left side, eighth row back." And still another said "You can tell it's not a real congregation, because then they would all be sitting at the back."

We are so steeped in the traditional customs of our faith, that sometimes we are in danger of letting those concrete things BECOME our faith. We have an image in our mind of what church looks like – whether it be pews in rows, or a minister in a robe, or stained glass or certain familiar faces. When we find ourselves dislocated from that image, we find it hard to settle into worship and faith.

What does it mean to take the church out of the church? To reconnect as the church in new and unfamiliar ways? What does it mean to rebuild the body of Christ?

In the vision of Ezekiel, the prophet is inspired by a vision – a vision called the Valley of Dry Bones. Which sounds terrifying, and not at all inspiring. However, when we read about that place according to Ezekiel's vision, it is a parable about transformation, about renewal, about resurrection.

Ezekiel said "the hand of the Lord came upon me." What a powerful image, to feel the physical touch of God, especially in a time when we are all feeling so isolated. In so many ways right now, we are separated from the ones who usually hug and hold us, who reach out a hand in welcome, who share hymn books and bulletins, or serve us coffee or juice with a smile.

Ezekiel knew and trusted that hand, he did not recoil when God set him down in a valley of dry bones. Normally valleys are the most fertile land, carved out by rivers and receding glaciers. But this valley is desolate, the riverbed is dry, and it is full of dry bones that have no life in them. "Our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Where once there was life, now there is no life. But will there be life again?

God asked Ezekiel: Can these bones live? The prophet replied: Why are you asking me, God? Isn't that up to you? God said: But you have a part to play too, Ezekiel. Prophecy to these bones and tell them that I will make them live again. So Ezekiel prophesies: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. God will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

Suddenly there was a rattling noise, and Ezekiel saw the bones come together, bone to its bone. Knit together by the sinews, then flesh, then finally skin. The story is about more than dry bones, however. Ezekiel prophesies to these bones: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe, that they may live." In Hebrew the words for breath, wind and Spirit are one and the same *ruah*. Once the Spirit, the very breath of God enters them, the bodies live, they have purpose and community.

Ezekiel's story reminds us: we are made of flesh and bone, of course, fluids and genes and DNA and everything else that gives us our physical presence. But life is also born of something spiritual – that mysterious breath of God which we first encounter in the creation story, when humanity is just a lump of clay or dust called Ah-damm. Then God "breathed into A-Dams nostrils the breath of life; and *THAT is when* A-Dam became a living soul." Without the spirit breathed into us by God, our Creator, the ancient faith story teaches us that we are not really alive.

Clearly that is what Ezekiel believes and that is what he longs for: a people who are not just "God's people" in name only, identified by where they stand or worship or what they say they believe. For Ezekiel we must reflect the very Spirit of the one who gives us life.

Ezekiel was speaking to a people who were dis-located by war and exile, their families were separated, their community bonds were broken. Perhaps that is why the prophet envisioned the real life and kinship of the community based in the Spirit and not in the flesh and bone of their biology, or concrete attachment to a specific place, or their claim on a particular pew.

When the Spirit of God moves, things happen. Not just once, in the original creation, or in the story of Ezekiel, but over and over again. In the dreams of prophets and from Jesus' blessing in an upper room, in the story of the Pentecost and in the final revelation, the wind is God's spirit at work in us and in the world.

But even though we are people of the Spirit, we do love the things of faith that we can touch and hold and share and build a church on.

More than a decade ago, here at Rideau Park, we started a prayer shawl ministry. I remember Ann Blades coming to me with the idea. As a knitter myself, I thought it was a great idea.

But I have to admit, I didn't really get it. I liked the physical symbol of the prayer shawl – their simple design and their beautiful colours, I also like the way we send them out into

the world, how they are carried forth by loved ones and ministers and pastoral care visitors and congregational representatives.

But those are all very concrete things.

It took a visit with a friend of ours for me to really “get” the spiritual meaning of our prayer shawl ministry. This friend had gone into hospital for a particular surgery – but it led to complications and more complications, and lots of rehabilitation afterward. So instead of being in hospital for just a couple of days, she was months in hospital – a long way away from home and family and, in particular, her familiar congregation.

One day a package arrived for her – and it contained a prayer shawl from her church family. It was much like the ones we have here, very simple, but a beautiful colour, warm and washable. She told us the shawl meant so much more to her than just a beautiful gift. For her it was a tangible symbol of the church’s care. She talked about wearing it when visitors came – just so she could tell them where it came from. She talked about feeling stronger when she wore it back and forth from physiotherapy. She talked about how it represented, to her, the church family that was so far away, and yet spiritually wrapping her in love and hope. The shawl reminded her that the spiritual power of God and God’s people is stronger and more life-giving than any physical thing that we may cling to for hope and survival. The real medicine of the shawl was not entwined in the yarn or the stitches or even the hands that created it. Like the flesh and sinews of the resurrected bones in Ezekiel’s vision, that is only part of the story. We also need to trust the Spirit’s presence within what is before us, even if we cannot see it in a concrete form.

I once led a baptism class with a group of parents who had requested baptism for their children. When I asked why they wanted their child baptized, most of them said something about church membership and grandparents insisting and not going to hell – the usual! Then one dad, someone I didn’t know very well – he spoke up and said he wanted his children baptized because he wanted them to know that there was more to life than work and money and pretty things and expensive toys. He wanted them to know that there was a spirit alive in the world, a spirit that connected every living thing. It was a mystery he didn’t understand, but when everything else was going wrong, he always felt it was there. Probably the only place his children were ever going to find people who celebrated that spirit’s presence was in church. So he wanted them to know it was real.

I wish, in this time when we are re-building a kind of digital church, that I had a prayer shawl that I could wrap around each and every one of you. Since that’s not possible, instead we can rely on the faith that we are wrapped in a Spirit who loved us. We are knit together, we are given life and new life, in God’s spirit. May we now find ways to live that love – whether we are together or apart.

Thanks be to God for the mystery and the gift of the Spirit in Christ we pray, Amen.