

## A LONG WINTER

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT

SHEPHERD OF THE VALLEY LUTHERAN CHURCH

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It was a spring day in April 597 B.C. when Ezekiel and about 5,000 other Israelites were marched out of the broken city of Jerusalem and on to their new existence in Babylon.

It had been a long winter. What made it particularly long was that the people had been starving for most of it. The Babylonian army had won a decisive victory in the fall; the Israelite army was crushed and destroyed. To save themselves, the people gathered what they could as they fled before the advancing soldiers and they fled into the city and closed the gates behind them.

The strong walls of the city gave them time and hope but through the winter their food supplies dwindled, their water ran low, garbage and sewage filled the city while rats and vermin began to spread disease in the close, confined quarters.

After such a winter, it was almost a relief when the Israelites surrendered and Babylon took the city on March 16 of that year. A few weeks later, the Babylonian army decided to put an end to any future rebellions by marching 10,000 of Israel's leaders and teachers to Babylon. Ezekiel was in the first group of those exiles.

Stepping out of the city for the first time in months must have felt freeing but very quickly the sight and smell of the dead and rotting bodies of the war only a few months before caught hold of Ezekiel's nose and eyes, and he pondered the future.

What could he as a prophet tell his people? What courage could he instill? What hope could he inspire? In fact, what future could he, himself enjoy?

Israel had no future. Their country now was no country. Their wealth was stolen from them. The vineyards and fields that they had carefully tended and nurtured for these many generations would soon be given to other people. They were being taken to a land that wasn't their own to work as foreign slaves with no hope of every owning their own homes, let alone seeing the land God had given to their ancestors. The house of God, the Temple, was in ruins and it was as if God had utterly abandoned them.

From now on, on a good day, they could expect to earn enough to feed themselves and their families. On a bad day they could only hope that tomorrow would be a good day.

What sort of existence is that?

In the months and years ahead, that gruesome image of the battlefield, littered with the carcasses of dead countrymen and colleagues haunted Ezekiel. The demoralizing walk across the desert from Jerusalem to Babylon, a thousand miles away, gave him time to think and reflect and discern that God's spirit was still with him.

And so Ezekiel revisits the battlefield in his memories. He discovers that if there is any hope possible for his people, it is only possible through God. If there is to be any redemption from the utter destruction they have experienced as a nation and a people, that redemption is only available through God. If his life is to have any meaning in the wake of such suffering and tragedy, that meaning must come from God.

To the question, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel realizes that if any life is possible in the wake of

such devastation, it must come from God, “O Lord God, you know.”

And God commands Ezekiel to prophesy a new message to the people of Israel, a message of hope. Then Ezekiel realizes that life is possible if it is centered on God. This is the message he begins to proclaim.

Our winter has not been anything like the long winter of 598 B.C. We have been fed, and watered, and while we may have had winter colds or the occasional flu, we are healthy and our needs seem met.

But in spite of our comforts and affluence, sometimes we feel like dry bones. Sometimes we seem to exist instead of live.

Between getting home from work late and running the kids off to hockey or basketball, or band, or dance, sometimes there isn't much left of us.

After we pay the mortgage and the bills and buy the groceries, sometimes we don't feel we have much to show for all our work and effort. We wonder how we can work so hard and still have zero left over.

Sometimes we feel so tired that we just turn on the TV and fall asleep on the couch until we can haul our tired bodies off to bed. We can go days before realizing that we haven't said a meaningful word to anybody about anything except “Pass the milk please,” or “Could you hand me the remote?”

We feel frustrated and edgy and chippy and we don't quite know why. We want to do something it and so we turn to a different channel, or get ourselves a cookie or a bowl of ice cream.

We struggle to affirm the hope that our life is greater than the sum of our days. We desperately hold onto the dream that our lives do have ultimate value and purpose.

But everywhere we turn, the proof—the silver bullet—that would give us the answers we need seems elusive.

What can breathe life back into these dry bones of ours? What force can allow our days to have meaning and life once again? What spirit can enter us that will give our lives courage, and purpose and meaning yet again?

Hear the Word of the Lord. Only God's power can wrap our bones with sinew and flesh. Only God can restore our spirits and fill our lungs with the four winds and give us breathe and spirit.

Faith doesn't make our lives easy; it makes our lives meaningful.

Faith doesn't prevent tragedy or hardships from knocking at our door. Faith gives us the strength to overcome bitterness and resentment by allowing God to breathe new opportunity into those tragedies.

Life doesn't have to be a long, cold winter that never ends. God offers to breathe a new spirit into our life that