

Ezek. 37:1–14

Ps. 130

Rom. 8:6–11

John 11:1–45

Can These Bones Live?

Goal for the Session

After exploring Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones, adults will envision how God can bring new life in desolate times.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Ezekiel 37:1–14

WHAT is important to know?

—From “Exegetical Perspective” by Stephen Breck Reid

The final section (vv. 11–14) contains the interpretative summary. The bones are the “whole house of Israel.” The phrase occurs in the Old Testament some twelve times, with half of the occurrences in the book of Ezekiel (Ezek. 3:7; 5:4; 20:40; 36:10; 39:25; see also Exod. 40:38; Lev. 10:6; Num. 20:29; 1 Sam. 7:2, 3; Jer. 13:11). This marks a return to the pan-Israelite sense of identity after the fall of Samaria (722 BCE) and especially after the fall of Jerusalem (587 BCE). God broke into the cemetery of the dead pan-Israelite community to inspire, bringing the Spirit in order to prompt a new life.

WHERE is God in these words?

—From “Theological Perspective” by Kelton Cobb

While there are additional, and equally biblical, ways to understand the story of salvation—for example, vanquishing the forces of evil or being cleansed of sin and filled with divine purpose—this plot of exile and return is part of the deep structure of the Bible. According to it, we are separated from God and are seeking a way to return, though we may not know it. This is Augustine’s confession of the restless heart that will find rest only when it returns to God. It is certainly the unrequited longing that is expressed in Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

—From “Pastoral Perspective” by Katherine E. Amos

What would an analysis of our spiritual bones indicate this Lenten season? What would we find out about our spiritual maturity if we examined our spiritual bones? Would we show a deficiency of a substantial diet of study, reflection, prayer, and a meaningful relationship with God? What would this examination tell us about the richness of our spiritual practices? How sincerely do we long and pray for the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? What would be our answer if the Lord spoke directly to us and questioned, “Can these bones live?”

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

—From “Homiletical Perspective” by James A. Wallace

This breath is the spirit of God, the life-giving *ruach* God breathed into the first human creature in the garden. This breath moves forth in the Lazarus story. This same breath was breathed into Jesus crucified, lifting him up to resurrection life, and touched us when the Spirit came upon us in baptism. This breath moves through the world, raising people into new life when all the odds are against it. We need to hear the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. It is a scene meant to live in the imagination and the heart, when we find ourselves gasping for breath, struggling to stay alive.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Focus on Your Teaching

The daily news is filled with sad stories of persons too soon taken by death and the many places of desolation in the world where suffering is caused by hunger, displacement, violence, and more. Many adults experience dry places in their lives, such as the loss of a job, an illness, or a failed relationship. They may wonder how they will experience restoration and renewal. In this session, adults will explore these dry places honestly, and see them as opportunities for growth. They will also imagine how they can be agents of God's power to renew life for others.

God, breathe your Holy Spirit into my intellect and my heart so that I may help my class to hear and embrace your renewing Word. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint or board
- markers
- optional: computer, Internet access, projector
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- candle and lighter
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 13, 2014

For Responding

- option 1: copies of Resource Sheet 1, board or newsprint, marker, paper, pens
- option 2: newsprint, markers, magazines, scissors, tape or glue

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, you may wish to do an Internet search for images based on the visions of the prophet Ezekiel. If you have access to the Internet in your classroom, you could show some of these images to supplement Resource Sheet 2. Prepare the board or newsprint for the Gathering activity. For option 3 in Responding, invite the guest leader well in advance of the session and orient him or her as to what you wish him or her to speak about.

Write the following statements on the board or newsprint:

- ✧ I learn more from my successes than my failures.
- ✧ I learn more from my failures than my successes.
- ✧ A very dry time in my life taught me that . . .
- ✧ I sense a need for my spiritual life to be renewed.

Greet participants as they arrive and ask them to read and think about the four statements. Ask them to choose just one and discuss it with one or two other people. Remind them that each person should get about one or two minutes to talk. When you sense that all have had an opportunity to talk, introduce today's focus scripture from Ezekiel. Though the prophet Ezekiel had many unusual visions, you will be studying and reflecting on the meaning of perhaps Ezekiel's most famous vision, the valley of the dry bones.

Lead the group in a breath prayer. Have them sit in a comfortable position and close their eyes and concentrate on their breathing. Invite them to pray silently "Give me your Spirit" as they breathe in and ". . . so I may serve" as they breathe out. After ten or so breaths, close the prayer by saying, "Amen."

As an alternative to reading the text dramatically, show the YouTube video narration and pantomime dance of Ezekiel 37:1–14 by the Expedited Praise Dance Company.

EXPLORING

Ezekiel 37:1–14 is another dramatic text that is best heard aloud. Ask a volunteer to read the text as if he or she is Ezekiel telling his vision for the first time. As the text is read, encourage the participants to listen with their eyes closed and imagine the scene Ezekiel is describing. When the reading is complete, ask volunteers to describe what they were seeing in their minds. Ask:

✿ What words or phrases stood out for you in the focus scripture?

Have participants look at the focus scripture in their Bibles and ask them to name the actions God is taking. Write these on the board or newsprint. Have them identify what actions are happening in the vision and which actions are promised in the future.

To help participants better understand who Ezekiel was and the context of his prophecies and visions, distribute Resource Sheet 2 (Ezekiel, Man of Visions). Review the sheet together and then ask the participants to imagine that they are Israelites from Judah living in exile in Babylon. Ask:

✿ How do you feel when you hear Ezekiel’s dry bones vision? Why?

✿ What questions do you have about God’s promise to bring you back to your homeland?

✿ What have your days living in exile in Babylon taught you?

Distribute Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Ezekiel 37:1–14). Have the participants read the “What?” paragraph. Remind the participants that Israel’s tribe divided into two kingdoms shortly after King Solomon died. The capital of the Northern Kingdom was Samaria. The capital of the Southern Kingdom was Jerusalem. Ask them to note who defeated Samaria and Jerusalem, and when. The bones in Ezekiel’s vision are “the whole house of Israel,” meaning both North and South. Ask: What does the commentator mean when he says “God broke into the cemetery of the dead pan-Israelite community . . .”?

Have the participants read the “Where?” excerpt. Ask them to complete this sentence: “*Exile* is to *return* as *separation* is to _____.”

The Hebrew word for the spirit that breathes life into the bones is *ruach*. This same word appears in Genesis 1:2 as “wind of God” or “spirit of God” moving over the face of the waters. Ask: How is God’s breath or spirit moving over the waters in creation like the breath or spirit blowing new life into Israel’s bones?

In moving to Responding, ask the participants to recall times when God brought renewal and new life to times of dryness or desolation in their lives. These examples may come from Scripture (*the elderly Sarah giving birth to Isaac; Jesus calling Lazarus from the tomb; the crucified Jesus resurrected*), or the examples may come from personal experience. Invite a couple of volunteers to briefly describe their time of dryness.

**EASY
PREP**

Lent is often observed as a time of disciplined denial, of giving up something physical for the sake of spiritual growth. Ezekiel's vision reminds us that growth and renewal can also spring from times of pain and loss.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. **Can These Bones Live?** To help participants identify ways they could renew their own spiritual bones, have them turn to Resource Sheet 1 and read the "So What?" excerpt. Lent can be a perfect time to examine our spiritual bones. Write the following statements on the board or newsprint, and ask participants to write down responses:

- ✪ I would describe my spiritual bones as _____ (one word).
- ✪ My spiritual bones are this way, because . . .
- ✪ My spiritual bones could use more _____.

Ask each individual to create a plan for strengthening his or her spiritual bones.

2. **Visions of New Life** Creating images of restoration will help in discussing concrete actions people can take. Form groups of three or four. Have participants imagine some place or situation of dry bones and how God might be renewing or restoring life in that situation. Each group will create a scene by drawing it, picturing it using photos or words cut from magazines, or acting out a scene. Ask them to consider how God is at work in this scene of restoration and what role people may be playing. Have each group present their image or scene to the whole group. Encourage participants to think about specific ways they can do life-restoring acts of kindness and love.
3. **Agents of renewal** Invite a speaker from your community who works in difficult circumstances to breathe life into people with dry bones, bringing healing and restoration. Have the speaker mention ways class members might get involved in the work. Ask participants to reflect on this person's story and invite them during the coming week to write down some ways they too can be agents of renewal.

CLOSING

Light a candle and place it in the center of the room or table. Ask participants to reflect on what they have learned in the session. Invite a volunteer or two to describe something learned. Then ask participants to think of people or situations that are in need of healing, renewal, or restoration. Have a time of open prayer, inviting volunteers to pray for these people and situations. Remind the group that they can pray silently as well.

Then close by praying the following prayer:

Restoring God, give us visions of new life and hope in the midst of desperate times. Make us agents of your healing and restoring love in all the circumstances we encounter. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for April 13, 2014, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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April 6, 2014
Can These Bones Live?

Adult
Resource Sheet 2

Ezekiel, Man of Visions



The first three verses of the book of Ezekiel tell us that Ezekiel had his first prophetic vision while living among the exiles by the River Chebar in Babylon. The exiles were people from Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, who had been forced to leave their homeland in 597 BCE. Their king, Jehoachin, was also taken with the hostages from Judah to Babylon. Jehoachin was in his fifth year as king when Ezekiel had his first vision in July of 593 BCE. Meanwhile, back in Judah, Zedekiah, a puppet king whom the Babylonians had installed in Jerusalem, led a rebellion, which the Babylonian army eventually crushed. In the summer of 587 BCE, the Babylonians tore down the walls of Jerusalem and burned and robbed the temple there. More Israelites were taken to Babylonia.

In one disturbing vision, Ezekiel describes the impending final destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, in which he sees God's very presence leave the temple (Ezekiel 10). God's glory abandons the temple because of the idolatry and injustice being practiced by some of Judah's leaders. These sins against God and more led to God's judgment against Judah and are the reason they and Ezekiel are now suffering in exile. But Ezekiel's visions are not all doom and gloom. He also brings a message of hope. The people will rise from their exile "grave" and return home (37:12). This later occurred when Cyrus of Persia defeated the Babylonians in 539 BCE and allowed the people of Judah to begin returning home, ending the exile officially in 538 BCE.

Ezekiel's final vision is of a restored worship in a new temple in Jerusalem (chapters 40–48). From that temple Ezekiel envisioned a river of life-giving water flowing out to nourish the land (Ezekiel 47:1–12). This river sounds a great deal like the vision in the book of Revelation that describes the river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God (Revelation 22:1–5).