

“The Dead, Walking”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Ezekiel 37:1-14
December 10, 2017 - Second Sunday of Advent

At about the age of eight or nine, I briefly expressed to someone in my family an interest in architecture, about which none of them knew anything. Thankfully, my family’s way of handling unfamiliar territory was to throw a book in its general direction. And so I was presented with a nine-by-twelve inch beauty by author and illustrator David Macaulay. This glorious book was called *Unbuilding*, and it kept my attention for months.

The premise of *Unbuilding* was that, in the far distant future of 1989, a billionaire Arabian sheik who’d made a fortune in oil decided that instead of building a new edifice to demonstrate his wealth, he would purchase the Empire State Building and have it moved from midtown Manhattan to the sheik’s desert dwelling. In order for this to happen, the building had to be dismantled, piece-by-piece, in a great “un-building.” This story served to let the author go into great detail about all the structures that make up a grand skyscraper.

Each page told how a new layer of construction — bricks and steel and concrete and glass — would be carefully removed. The hand-drawn pictures were the stars of this book, peeling away the exterior of a building I had seen in person and on television many times to show what held it together. I watched the Empire State Building go from a grand structure, to an exposed skeleton, to disassembled parts.

The kingdoms of Israel and Judah had experienced their un-building. The kingdoms were defeated. Sovereignty had been lost. The people had been sent into exile. In our study of the Psalms over the summer, we kept bumping into phrases within lament Psalms that talked about bones:

Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing; O LORD, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.
(Psalm 6:2)

Do not hide your face from me in the day of my distress. Incline your ear to me; answer me speedily in the day when I call. For my days pass away like smoke, and my bones burn like a furnace. (Psalm 102:2-3)

Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eye wastes away from grief, my soul and body also. For my life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing; my strength fails because of my misery, and my bones waste away. (Psalm 31:9-10)

God has heard the people's lament and noticed the language they are using. So God gives Ezekiel this grisly vision. It's a valley of bones. *Lots* of bones, picked clean of their flesh, dried out and bleached by the sun. It's the aftermath of a battle, but not a battle — a slaughter. A terrible defeat. God takes Ezekiel around on a tour of the valley of bones. It's a heap of despair, this pile of bones that have clearly been here awhile. Death has had its way in this place. It has left only the bones.

God asks the preposterous question, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And Ezekiel isn't quite bold enough to say, "Of course, boss." But he's also smart enough to know a setup when he smells it. "O LORD God, you know." *Well played, Zeke*. And then he is instructed to prophesy to the bones and as he does, the dry bones start to rattle and to organize themselves and the great unbuilding of these bodies happens in reverse. Sinews and flesh and skin cover them, and if we stopped here we'd have a valley full of zombies.

Literature and film have long poked around at dead bodies to make them move, from Dr. Frankenstein's monster to mummies to *Night of the Living Dead*. As you might know, zombies have been a bit of a pop culture phenomenon over the past few years as part of a broader fascination with dystopian fantasy. We are interested in the breakdown of civilization and law and order and social norms. We wonder if a calamity that rocks the world would leave us, the living, as dead ones walking. And we are interested, it seems, in the breakdown of bodies, and then their reanimation. What makes zombies scary is that they are already dead, and they are people we might know, and then the thought that if we get caught, we'll be the ones shuffling along, trapped in our own terror.

God is not finished with these bones when they are reanimated corpses. Ezekiel is told to "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." And he does, and what had been a valley of desiccated bones becomes a valley of life. And just in case you weren't quick on the uptake, God explains that the bones represent the whole house of Israel, crying out that they are cut off from God, unbuilt, de-fleshed, and hung out to dry. God promises to raise them up from this state and return them to their land and breathe a holy spirit into them.

This story, a mug of hot cocoa, and some twinkling lights. It's like a Norman Rockwell Christmas painting, isn't it? Here we are preparing for birth — for incarnation and the arrival of a new day and *Joy to the World* — and this morning we get what feels like Halloween's last stand against Christmas lights in Target in October.

We always hear from the prophets in Advent, because while the prophets of Israel often seem like doom-and-gloom fanatical wet blankets, what they are going for — even as it is missed by their hearers by a country mile — is renewed attention to the promises of life and rebirth and re-creation and resurrection and hope that we have received from our God. And those promises are not diminished when the air stinks of death's supper. The promises are magnified. As people

awaiting the birth of the Christ, we know too well that it is here, in this pile of bones, in this cemetery, in this tomb, that we will be brought to our knees and confronted with the question of what God can do.

I remember being on the Pediatric Intensive Care Unit at Children's of Alabama one winter morning when a bright and vibrant teenager named La'Sandra died from brain cancer. Her family and I formed a circle around her bed and prayed as she took her final breaths. One of her uncles said, to nobody in particular, that the last breath of the dying goes out into the world and becomes the first breath of the newly born.

Ezekiel's message is clear: God has the power, through the Word and with the breath of the Spirit, to take what is dead and abandoned and stripped bare and dried up and not even rattling, and un-un-build it all. And so, the prophet reminds us, when you are crying out that you are dead, cry out for breath and flesh and life and expect to receive it.

We wait for and expect breath and flesh and life. God will enter this dried out world in bone and tendon and muscle and fat and skin. The child who is coming — the one we call the Word of God — will have lungs to scream and to sing and to teach and to question everything and to comfort and to bless and to heal and to offer peace. And those lungs will breathe their last, and through the Word and with the breath of the Spirit, new life will rise like a green blade through the frozen ground.

Amen.