

# **A Future with Hope – For the Beauty of Creation**

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### **NPMC – Aug. 27, 2023**

*Scripture – Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:18-27*

*Hymns – VT 120 - For the Beauty of the Earth; VT 706 - O Healing River*

#### **Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSV)**

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” <sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them, but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, “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.” <sup>10</sup> I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup> Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ <sup>12</sup> Therefore prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup> I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

#### **Romans 8:18-27**

<sup>18</sup> I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. <sup>19</sup> For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, <sup>20</sup> for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope <sup>21</sup> that the creation itself will be set free from its enslavement to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. <sup>22</sup> We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labor, <sup>23</sup> and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. <sup>24</sup> For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? <sup>25</sup> But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with groanings too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches hearts, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

As we come to the end of our summer worship series, “For the Beauty of the Earth,” we’re also coming to the end of the hottest summer on record all over the northern hemisphere. Many days, when we go outside, thick smoke hangs in the air, turning the sky an eerie, hazy yellow, turning the sun red, burning our throats. The news keeps telling us of even more wildfires, more evacuations of people from their homes, more instability due to natural disasters caused by climate change. It can be hard to look at all of these things and not be overwhelmed with despair for ourselves and for the future. What can we possibly do in the face of this grim emergency? Where can we find hope for a peaceful future for the generations that come after us, and for all of creation?

Speaking about eco-anxiety in our current context, theologian Anthony Siegrist – perhaps unexpectedly – brings up the topic of divine providence. Does this ancient idea that God is somehow providing for us and watching over our world even apply anymore? He writes, “the biophysical disruptions caused by the industrialized economy are breaking the known cycles and patterns. This is new. We wonder - and worry - about the hellish forces being let loose upon the earth. In our imagination these changes do not evoke life’s neat and vaguely biblical arc. They evoke the threatening riders of the apocalypse... Like the original audience of the opening chapters of Genesis, we long for God to bring order, for God’s Spirit to brood over the unpredictable churning of the climate with motherly attention.”<sup>1</sup>

Our Scripture passages for today certainly also each evoke a sense of apocalypse in their own way. Ezekiel 37 contains the familiar vision of the valley of the

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Siegrist, “As Long as the Earth Endures: Looking for Providence in the Ecological Crisis,” *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 24/1 (Spring 2023): 10, <https://press.palni.org/ojs/index.php/vision/issue/view/70>

dry bones, which many of us likely know from the “Dry Bones” song that was part of our children’s time today! But as we re-read it as adults, it’s going to have some nuances that are absent from the Sunday school version. So God takes the prophet Ezekiel to this valley where there has been a great battle, and it’s full of the bones of the fallen. This is essentially a mass grave, and an old one, as we’re told the bones are “very dry.” It’s a grisly site of terrible violence. So it’s here that God asks Ezekiel this very poignant question: “Mortal, can these bones live?” (v. 3). And Ezekiel, bless his little heart, pretty much evades the question, giving the equivalent of a big shoulder shrug. So God instructs him, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD” (v. 4-6).

So Ezekiel prophesies to these dry, dead bones, and while he is still speaking the words, there is “a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.” This sounds a bit spooky, to be honest! And there, before Ezekiel’s very eyes, the bones become linked with sinews, and wrapped in flesh and skin. But they aren’t yet fully alive. So God has Ezekiel prophesy again, saying, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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 the breath of life enters their lungs and they stand up and are alive, “a vast multitude.” And God explains to Ezekiel that they represent the exiled Israelites, who lament “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (v. 11). So God has one last message

for Ezekiel to prophesy to the people: “Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel” (v. 12).

You might be wondering: what does this fairly bizarre vision have to do with the climate emergency? As I sat with this text, I found it meaningful to think of it in connection with God bringing life out of death, this literal undoing of destruction and violence. What might this mean for desertified soil, for the burned skeletons of forests, for bleached coral reefs, for cattle who have died due to drought? “Mortal, can these bones live?” Read this way, this passage speaks to a vision of ecological resurrection – think the coral reefs which have been restored or the species brought back from the edge of extinction which Patrick spoke about. This passage gives us a promise of hope – yes, these bones can live; this destruction can be undone.

But notice also that Ezekiel is no mere observer of these events! God asks Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones no less than three times, and it is only with his participation that they come back to life. So, “mortal, can these bones live?” is also speaking to our “dry bones,” awakening us to act for the sake of restoring life, to do our part for God’s vision of a just peace. This is good news – there are things we can do! This is also something we’ve spoken to in our worship series this summer, and I have appreciated that there are many different ways of doing this depending on our abilities, stages of life, and other circumstances. To give you an example, for the first seven years of my marriage, K and I were a car-free family. We exclusively biked and took public transit – including for unusual things such as transporting our compost to our community garden, going car-free camping, and our first year with a baby. Now our

schedules and mobility are such that this is no longer possible, but for that stage of our lives, it was something we could do.

So what are we able to take on, individually or as a community? These are some possible actions that we've talked about this summer: gardening, being mindful about what we buy and consume (as Luke reminded us), the food we eat, our transportation (esp. reducing flying, which causes the most emissions), being mindful about composting/green bins, recycling, supporting thrift stores, mending, writing letters and signing petitions to our government leaders to pass environmental policies (as Sandy Plett spoke about), supporting scientific projects to restore wetlands, coral reefs, etc. (as Patrick mentioned), becoming involved in church efforts to work at this together (perhaps joining the MC Sask Climate Emergency Response Team<sup>2</sup> or using the MC Canada grant for churches to 'green' their buildings).<sup>3</sup> We are not all doing the same things, and that's fine – but there is something for each of us to do. I've heard it said that injustice is a web, so whatever thread we pull is helping to unravel it. For example, a recent film about Pope Francis's work for climate justice brings together the four groups whom climate change affects the most: climate refugees displaced by natural disasters, Indigenous people working to protect fragile ecosystems, young people, and scientists – not a combination we'd necessarily expect, but these groups are very much connected. And so are we.<sup>4</sup>

But this kind of work does not produce instantaneous results. It's long-term, and to sustain that we need hope. This is what our Romans 8 passage speaks to. Now

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://mcsask.ca/cert>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mennonitechurch.ca/climate-action>

<sup>4</sup> To learn more and watch the film, see: <https://www.theletterfilm.org/>

maybe you've heard interpretations of this passage that speak negatively about creation, because we're told that creation has been tainted by sin. The NRSV says that "creation was subjected to futility," and is waiting to "be set free from its enslavement to decay." If we read it with the climate emergency in mind, however, the meaning shifts. What if this is speaking not of natural processes of death and decay, but about the destruction we have inflicted on creation? In this sense, we are well aware these days that all of creation is "groaning"! But notice the hope-filled metaphor that Paul uses for what type of suffering this is: these are the groans and pains of childbirth, which we and creation are going through together (v. 23). This type of suffering has the potential to bring about new life! So Paul is painting for us a vision of hope, a time when our bodies and the groaning body of creation will be redeemed from our futility and destructiveness, from our ecological sins. So "we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience." But this is not easy. We need help to keep before us this hope for which we don't yet have any visible evidence. And this is where the Holy Spirit comes in, "interced[ing] for us with groanings too deep for words" (v. 26). And the presence of the Spirit with us through all of this groaning is itself deeply hopeful and encouraging.

Siegrist talks about this hopeful presence of the Holy Spirit with us during this time of ecological crisis in this way, writing: "In John 14, Jesus promised his students that they would not be left 'orphaned.' The Holy Spirit, the 'Advocate,' [or KJV: 'Comforter'] would be sent among them. ... We experience God's provision for creation through the presence of the Spirit." This reminds us that God isn't floating somewhere off in space, far above us, but is rather right here with us, infusing creation. As Elizabeth

Johnson says, “Like a saturated sponge creation is dripping with divine presence... The life of the Spirit pervades the world.”<sup>5</sup> God is all around us, as close to us as our breath.

Using very similar words, Indigenous plant scientist Robin Wall Kimmerer speaks about finding hope in that the world continues to take care of us. She writes, “Even a wounded world is feeding us. Even a wounded world holds us, giving us moments of wonder and joy. I choose joy over despair. Not because I have my head in the sand, but because joy is what the earth gives me daily and I must return the gift.”<sup>6</sup> This quote from Kimmerer again conveys the “why” of this kind of action for change, grounded in the kinds of attitudes we need to cultivate in which to ground our hope: gratitude, learning from Indigenous knowledges, examining our attitudes toward creation and non-human life, searching our Bibles for eco-wisdom.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” We who follow the Risen One can continue to hope that yes, God can bring new life out of death – not by some supernatural miracle alone, but with our participation, with our enthusiastic cooperation. In this way, we can be grateful that God provides a future with hope – an ecological resurrection which can redeem us and all of creation. AMEN

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<sup>5</sup> Siegrist, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), 327.