

Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

Title: When It Feels Like There Is No Hope

Lesson: Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:17-27

37 *The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. ¹¹ Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'"*

There are many different moments in life. Sometimes we experience joy, and sometimes we experience happiness. We hope that our lives would always be like that, but unfortunately, that is not always the case. There are also moments when we feel like there is no hope at all.

Sometimes, this feeling of hopelessness does not stay for just one day, or remain only in a difficult season. It continues, and continues—and before we know it, it feels like things will remain difficult going forward, like there is no hope at all, and like nothing will ever change.

Perhaps some of you have felt that way before. Even if it was not something dramatic or obvious, quietly, slowly—a feeling that things are not getting better, a feeling that there is no hope at all.

Last month, I had a chance to speak on the phone with a pastor. I was asking for advice, seeking wisdom, and sharing different things, and naturally, we began talking about my ministry. I shared that one of the churches I serve has been sustained for the past five or six years by a small, faithful group of about five people—almost like a special forces team—and that recently, the church has been facing several challenges, so we have been praying together as a congregation.

When the pastor heard that the church had been maintained by just a few members for five or six years, the pastor was very surprised. And what the pastor said to me surprised me as well, and made me think deeply.

The pastor told me that a church the pastor knew, which had about twenty people attending regularly, had already closed several years ago. As I reflected on that conversation, I began to wonder: What makes the difference?

Why do some give up even when their situation seems better, while others continue even when their situation seems worse? Is it their strength? Is it their willpower? Or is it something deeper than that?

(Slide 1) When I read today's passages from Ezekiel and John, I felt that the Scriptures speak directly to this very question. In Ezekiel 37, the prophet Ezekiel is led into a valley. And what he sees there is not just death—but something even deeper than despair: complete hopelessness.

Bones were scattered all over the ground. They seemed to be human bones. If you were standing in a valley surrounded by bones, how would you feel? It would probably be frightening. And these were not fresh bones. They were not recently dead, still moist, with traces of blood. They were completely dry bones. There was no sign of life at all, no possibility, and certainly no future.

But then God asks Ezekiel a strange question: “Can these bones live?” Think about it. From our perspective, the answer is very clear: “No.” What kind of hope could we possibly find in dry bones? But Ezekiel does not answer that way. Instead, he says: “O Lord God, You know.” Then something happens. God speaks.

And as God speaks, those bones—where there seemed to be no possibility—come together, flesh appears, and skin covers them. At that point, they begin to

look like human beings. The situation has improved compared to when they were just dry bones, but still, there is no life in them. Not until God breathes into them. Only after God breathes into them do they come alive.

Yes—that is when hope appears. And the story does not end there, because this story is connected to the story of Lazarus.

(Slide 2) In the time of Jesus, we see what this truly means in a concrete way. In John 11, Lazarus is not just sick. He is dead. He has been buried—for four days. By the time Jesus arrives, it is already too late. There is even a bad smell coming from the body. Martha likely speaks with a mixture of grief and disappointment: “Lord, if you had been here...”

Her words carry deep pain. They carry deep disappointment, and a sense of irreversible despair. But in that situation, Jesus responds: “I am the resurrection and the life.” Then, in front of everyone, Jesus calls the dead man out of the tomb. And amazingly, Lazarus—who had been dead for four days, whose body had already begun to smell—gets up and walks out of the tomb.

The story of Ezekiel shows us a vision. The story of Lazarus shows us reality. In Ezekiel, God asks: “Can these bones live?” And in John, Jesus answers: “Yes.” And He shows it. What was once only a vision becomes a concrete reality—flesh and blood—through Jesus. This is who God is. God is the One who works in places where we see no possibility, where we cannot find any hope.

We live in a time when many churches are worried. There are fewer young people, congregations are aging, and the future feels uncertain. Sometimes, we may feel like we are in a valley of dry bones.

So what should we do in situations like this? How should we interpret and respond? Should we try harder than before? Should we become stronger? These responses may sound good, but that is not what today’s message is telling us. The message we hear today is this: **God is not finished yet.**

Some churches were in better situations than ours, yet they gave up because they could no longer see hope or possibility. But the church I know, with only four or five people, have continued to serve faithfully with all they had. And perhaps, it was not just their decision or determination. Perhaps it was because God was still breathing life into that place.

Friends, the church must be centered on the Word of God. We are not just a community. We are a faith community centered on Jesus Christ. This is essential—and yet, we often miss it. We become distracted by outward things and misunderstand. We think a good church is a church with many people. A healthy church is financially stable. A healthy church has well-organized systems. But in Ezekiel’s story, God makes it very clear: Many people? Stable finances? Good systems? They are nothing more than tendons, flesh, and skin on dry bones.

No matter how big a church is, no matter how many people it has, no matter how stable it is financially, or how well its systems are organized—if Jesus Christ is not at the center, it is only a shell.

Yes, friends, a community that is not centered on the Word of God—no matter how good it looks on the outside—is nothing more than a social club. Only when the Word of God is at the center can a community truly stand in a healthy way.

Some people may think that pastors are different. But I am not. There are times when I am also overwhelmed by negative thoughts. There have been moments when I felt like there was no hope. During my ordination process, I thought things might be different once I was ordained. But... honestly, I don’t know. No one is perfect, and we are all weak.

When those difficult thoughts come, it is not always easy for me to shake them off. But when those thoughts continue, I often arrive at a similar conclusion: I’m not strong. To entrust everything to God, and to simply do my best with what I am called to do.

Friends, there may be times when your life, or our church community, feels like dry bones. There may be times when you see no hope, no possibility, and you feel like these difficult situations will never change.

If that is you, then listen to the Word of God. God works especially in those places. In the valley of dry bones, in situations like sealed tombs, God never gives up on us. Those moments can never be the end of our story.

Because our God is still speaking. He is not finished yet. And our God is still breathing life into us.

(Slide 3) So, friends, maybe the question today is not: “Is there hope?”

But the question today is: “**Will we trust the God who brings life where there is none?**” I pray that you may answer this question with “Amen.” Amen.