

Back in the early fifties, a singer named Big Joe Turner gathered with a group of rhythm-and-blues musicians in New York City. In the offices of Atlantic Records, they pushed the furniture to the walls and recorded a song called "Shake, Rattle and Roll." It was quickly picked up and recorded by Bill Haley & His Comets, and then by Elvis Presley. The song became the first international rock 'n' roll hit, Bill Haley's first gold record, a best-seller for Decca Records in 1954 and an important piece of rock history. Over six decades later, people still "Shake, Rattle and Roll."

But not even Big Joe Turner can take credit for the debut of his distinctive shake, rattle and roll sound. Going back, way back, more than 60 years (500 years before the birth of Christ to be exact) we find the prophet Ezekiel in exile in the city of Babylon. While in captivity, the prophet sees seven visions, which include messages of judgment on Israel, messages of judgment on the nations of the world, and promises of future blessings for the people of Israel.

Sadly chapter 37 of Ezekiel, our first lesson this morning, begins in a very lifeless place. The passage seems more like a judgment than a blessing when the prophet reports that the hand and the spirit of God "set me down in the middle of a valley that was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry." Bones. Dry bones. There were no signs of life. No guitar ballads or rock 'n' roll drumbeats. God says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And the prophet, seeing no evidence of vitality, simply says, "O LORD God, you know."

For Ezekiel, life for these bones does not seem possible. They are dry, and we all know what dry feels like. Dry is when you are finding no career path in your 20s, struggling to get pregnant in your 30s, feeling distant from your spouse in your 40s, losing your job in your 50s, worrying about retirement in your 60s, and suffering the death of your spouse in your 70s or 80s. Mortal, can these bones live?

It doesn't seem possible. The bones are dry, so very dry. But the prophet knows that nothing is impossible with God. "O LORD God," he says, "you know." And as we will witness in our first lesson, and even in our Gospel narrative for today, God knows and is all about resurrection!

God gives a command to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD." The prophet is told to deliver the word of God to the dry bones scattered across the valley, because His word has the power to create something new, to bring life to the dead. Since the beginning of time, God's word has shown creative, life-giving power. In the first chapter of Genesis, God says, "Let there be light," and there *is* light -- the word of God creates a new reality, bringing light into darkness. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises that "my word ... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose." "In the beginning was the Word," says the gospel of John, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... All things came into being through him." And in Psalm 119, we find a person deep down in the dumps, with his soul clinging to the dust. "Revive me," he pleads to God, "according to your word." Give me life, he says, according to your enlightening, purposeful, world-creating word.

Throughout the Bible, the word of God has life-giving power. But we sometimes overlook this in a world so full of empty, meaningless, trivial or untrustworthy words. A flood of words comes at us constantly, through our televisions, radios, through websites, billboards, text messages, and ads on our smart phones. We know that some of these words are untrue, others are destructive, and still others are trying to manipulate us. The result is that we don't always have a very high opinion of words.

But Ezekiel is willing to trust the word of God. In the middle of his own dry, dusty, lifeless experience in exile, he's willing to put his faith in God who says to

the bones, "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and will put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

God promises to cause breath to enter the bones -- literally, he causes *ruah* to enter. *Ruah* is the Hebrew word for breath, and it also means wind and spirit. *Ruah* is the breath that inspires God's creative words. *Ruah* is the "breath of life" that is snuffed out by the great flood in the book of Genesis. *Ruah* is the "wind from God" that sweeps over the face of the waters at the beginning of creation. *Ruah* is the "holy spirit" that we need in order to feel the presence of God in our lives. Breath. Wind. Spirit. *Ruah*. God puts it into us so that we can live, just as he promised for Ezekiel and his chosen people.

Although Easter is still two weeks away, today's story asks the question of this Lenten season: Can life come out of death? Biblical scholar Iain Duguid notes the connection between the valley, the tomb, and our lives today: "For Ezekiel, what happened to the bones first happened to him. So, it is with us: What God does for each and every Christian, he has first of all done for Jesus." The Lord brought life out of death. And God's mission wasn't just to offer forgiveness of our sins through his Son's death. It was to grace us with new life through Jesus' resurrection.

For Christians today, death isn't the final verdict. Believers can always have hope. As our first lesson demonstrates, no situation is beyond God's reach. In this morning's narrative it isn't difficult for us to imagine that the Israelites are feeling dead and dried up, defeated and scattered, as they waste away in exile. But God hasn't forgotten them, and he promises to open their graves and bring them back to their homeland. "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live," promises the Lord."

The key is God's Spirit — an awesome, life-giving power that can bring hope to the hopeless and life to the most disconnected and desiccated of bones. So, the answer to God's original question to Ezekiel is really quite simple. "Mortal, can these bones live?" Yes, if they're filled with the Spirit of God.

The very same is true for us. Today's passage is not an excerpt from a prophetic self-help book, one which instructs us to reform, reinvent, or reorganize ourselves into more efficient individuals, or to become a more effective congregation. No, it's a passage that challenges us to open ourselves to the life-giving power of God's Spirit, a Holy Spirit that comes to us for one purpose and one purpose only: so that we will know that God is the Lord.

In today's story we witness Ezekiel trusting God's breath-wind-spirit and speaking God's word. As he prophesied to the bones, he reports, "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone." Through the power of God, the bones begin to "shake, rattle and roll." But that's not all. Sinews, flesh and skin suddenly appear on the bones, and they begin to look like living beings. All they lack is the breath of life -- God's breath-wind-spirit. And so, Ezekiel prophesies to the breath, and "the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

What was once dusty, dry, and dead is now alive. New life is created by the word of God and the breath-wind-spirit of God. God says to Ezekiel, "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.'" God then commands Ezekiel to assure them that he will open their graves, bring them back to life, and return them to their homeland in Israel. "I will put my spirit within you," promises God, "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."

This promise is true for us as well, when our bones are dried up and our hope is lost. God's word and God's breath-wind-spirit can give us new life, as individuals and as a community of faith. To help me emphasize the point I am trying to make I would like to end with a short inspiring illustration.

A woman walked into a Presbyterian church in Virginia, unsure of what to expect. She had grown up in a home with no religion and no talk of God. But the members of the church welcomed her, befriended her, included her, and nurtured her in the Christian faith.

After being baptized and becoming a church member, she said to the congregation, "Just a few years ago, I tiptoed into the narthex as one who did not believe in God. Your support transformed me, and I stand before you now confidently and say that I do now believe in God. I know I could just leave it at that, but you as a congregation have always expected me to go a bit deeper, to explore that more. Part of your nurture of faith has asked me to seek meaning so I can live into that which I say I believe. So, to say that I believe in God means for me that I believe that hope is stronger than despair, that pain will always be followed by healing, that within darkness there is light, that death is never final, that in any sadness there is opportunity for joy."

And just as it was for that woman in Virginia willing to share her faith with her congregation, God's word has life-giving power. God's wind-breath-spirit can revive individuals, congregations, and communities. When dry bones begin to rattle and join together, we discover together that hope is stronger than despair, death is never final, and sadness can give way to joy. Shake, Rattle and Roll. It's much more than a song, it's a sign that God is always raising us to new life through his son Jesus Christ. And Thanks be to God for that. Amen.