

## ***Zombie Apocalypse vs. the Breath of God***

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Is it a good thing or a bad thing for the dead to come back to life? For a lot of people in our culture, that seems to be the scariest thing in the world. Over the past few years, zombies have been a big fad, from books like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* to TV shows like *The Walking Dead* to movies like *World War Z*. The idea that the dead would arise—not to haunt us like ghosts but to walk around in physical but soulless bodies that eat our faces off—seems to be even more frightening these days than the prospect of aliens or vampires (who turned out to be sexy). Zombies are not sexy. They represent everything bad about humans if you remove all the love and connection and meaning from human lives. They represent, perhaps, the side of ourselves or our species that we are afraid of. Or maybe they are a form of social commentary like T. S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" or the manufacture of the Orc warriors in *The Fellowship of the Ring*. It is possible, the zombies seem to demonstrate, to be alive technically but be dead spiritually and utterly out of control.

You might be surprised how many religion scholars and social scientists have written papers on the zombie phenomenon. You won't believe how many sites you'll find if you Google "Zombie Theology." But then, less than a month ago it was revealed that the Pentagon had developed a strategic plan to address a zombie apocalypse. Only a training exercise, or so they say.

The reason I bring this up is the story in Ezekiel 37 of the dry bones coming to life. It is possible to read this as a creepy scene from a graphic novel or SciFi Channel show. The mysterious figure of the prophet—a kind of Gandalf—is taken by God to the middle of a valley which is covered with human skeletons. Imagine Captain Kirk landing in such a scene. We do not know what has happened here: a great battle (greater than the battle for Normandy we remembered Friday), a terrible plague, starvation, mass suicide? Then the divine voice says to the prophet to tell the bones that God's breath will make them alive. But it doesn't happen at once. First the tendons connect the bones; then muscle appears over the bones; then the muscles are covered with skin. But there is no breath and no movement. So what we have now is not living people who look alive. You could say that these are corpses still, or you could say that they are zombies. All this has happened as if by God's magic, but he has not yet given them life. Then the prophet commands the wind of God, or the breath of God, or the spirit of God to blow on these halfway humans. The breath of God comes into these bodies—as the breath came into Adam in the beginning—and they come to life. They go from lying down to standing up. The NRSV says they were "a vast multitude," but most translations render the Hebrew as "a great army." If you don't read it as a parable of God restoring life to his hopelessly destroyed people, this is the part that seems especially creepy to me: an army of resuscitated corpses on the march destroying the enemies of Israel, a kind of ancient zombie apocalypse.

But of course this *is* a parable and not a reporting of a historic event. Yahweh himself interprets the parable for 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.’” On one level the people of Israel are just being realistic. Their nation was destroyed by the Babylonians—the capital city taken and virtually evacuated, the Temple which represented their national identity torn down, their borders meaningless. We know examples of nations that have been destroyed. Only the unrealistic think it is possible to restore the nation of Armenia, or the Confederate States of America, or Byzantium, or to raise up Babylon in the midst of modern Iraq. At a certain point, when a nation is gone, it is gone. But Yahweh says “Nothing is impossible for my spirit. I breathe life into the dead. I breathed life into inanimate humanity at the beginning. I can bring you as a people out of your graves and make you alive again as a nation. I will put my spirit in you—again it could just as well be read I will put my breath in you or put my wind in you—and you shall become alive.”

There is this sense in the Bible that life comes from God and that it is by breath that God puts life into humans and into animals as well. This idea that the life was in the breath was strong enough that in this country in the context of the abortion debate many rabbis argued that life begins with the first breath, after delivery. I think we know better, scientifically, but you can certainly make as good a case biblically that life begins at birth as that it begins at conception. This idea is behind Paul’s linking “spirit” and “life” in his letters. It is both literally and mythically the breath that gives life. It is God who breathes real life to us when we are for all practical purposes dead. Once you were dead in your sins, hopeless, dry bones, and God breathed life into you. In Romans 8:11, Paul says “he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit”—through the breath of God breathed into your bodies just as the breath of God breathed life into the dry bones in the valley.

That’s why, of course, Ezekiel 37 is a traditional lectionary reading for Pentecost. It is a parable about the coming of the Spirit to give life to God’s people. In the Old Testament the people of God are hopeless because the enemy has triumphed and God seems to have been defeated. After Jesus died on the cross in the New Testament it also appears that the enemy has triumphed and God has been defeated. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the mighty wind of God doing something that we considered impossible. And at the beginning of the book of Acts, before Pentecost, it seems to me that in spite of the resurrection Jesus’ followers still face the problem that Jesus has departed without establishing the kingdom. How God’s wind is going to do that, how God can breathe life into the world, is at this point a mystery. How God’s breath carries God’s life across ethnic and national barriers is the plot of the book of Acts.

So what does this have to do with us? The first way we read this story is as a parable for the church. Here’s a good rule of thumb for Old Testament interpretation: if the text talks about Israel as the people of God, we ought to apply that primarily to the church—not to our nation, not to the modern secular state of Israel, but to ourselves as we understand ourselves to be the people of God. In the midst of declining attendance in mainline Protestant churches—and now even the Southern Baptists are hitting the panic button at their declining numbers—it’s not a stretch to imagine yourself walking through church buildings that are only skeletons where once there was life. Those of us Baby Boomers who grew up in church grew up in a

time when the church was booming, too, in most places in America. And now we find that we have spent our entire adult life—my entire ministry—watching the numbers go down, and as some perceive it, watching the life drain out of the church. At least out of *our* churches. The ethnic churches might be alive (we call them ethnic as if we have no ethnicity and are the default genome); churches in other countries are thriving; but in the 250-year-old white churches like this one the prognosis is not good and we are barely holding onto our DNA. A few bad years and we'll be dry bones like the West Side Baptist Church or the Free Methodist church. That's what we are afraid of, anyway, and what keeps us in a defensive mode that makes it hard for us to be attentive to the breath of God.

So let's say that in a dream, or in a nightmare, we are walking around the skeleton of the old First Baptist Church of Block Island. This building hasn't been used in some time. The roof has blown off and not replaced. Jesus still stands there smiling down at empty pews and a congregation of crows, with the occasional deer. That glorious piano has been rained on and left untouched for years. There is no music and no preaching, and the sounds of children's voices have not been heard so long even Jesus can't remember. If you want to get as graphic as Ezekiel, imagine that the skeletons of church members are still sitting in the pews, dry as dust.

The Lord says to the preacher: "Can this place come back to life?" The preacher, unwilling to commit himself and recognizing his ignorance, says, "Lord, you know, not me." The Lord says to the preacher, "Preach in this dead place. Proclaim my word to the skeletons." One of the classic teachers of preaching in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Andrew Blackwood, wrote that this story is the most penetrating description of the work of the preacher in the Bible. When you preach the gospel to unbelievers, you know they are dead and can't respond to the message unless God's breath comes to them. When you preach to the church, you sometimes still feel like you are walking around in a valley of dead bones. You ask yourself, "What am I doing? Why am I preaching to the dead?" The answer is that God has given me his word and commissioned me to preach to the people who are gathered in this place, dead or alive. And yet you know that you are engaged in an absurd act. Nothing you say is going to make any difference at all unless the breath of God that gives life takes those words and carries them into the hearts of the hearers and causes the seed of the word to sprout. For some reason, God has chosen to use the words of the preacher rather than direct words from God's mouth (as it were) into your minds as his way of bringing life to the dead. This is a mystery before which every preacher trembles.

In our dream, whether life returns to the skeleton church is not a matter of whether the preacher does a good job. It is entirely about whether God's wind blows on the church, whether God puts his mouth on the empty roof and does mouth-to-mouth while pounding on our hearts. There is no strategy for bringing the dead back to life but to have God breathe life into them as he breathed it into that creature of mud in the very beginning. But if God's breath, God's Spirit, does fall on the church, then look out! Bones start to rattle, and ligaments renew the relationships between bones, and the strength to do things returns as muscle forms, and then we get covered with skin and become beautiful. I think that's the dream of God, and I want my dream to wander in that direction.

I want to tell you about a man name John Girardeau who lived in Charleston in the years before and after the Civil War. He was a white man and a supporter of the Southern cause, but he wanted to see black people come to faith in Christ. He was just a couple of years out of seminary when he got sent to the Anson Street Presbyterian Church, with 48 black members and 12 white. It was a new church start focused on reaching slaves, but it wasn't doing very well. Girardeau started a prayer meeting asking God to send revival, and eventually the prayer meeting grew in attendance to fill the sanctuary. The church officers urged the pastor to begin preaching, but he declined to start preaching services, saying he was waiting for the outpouring of the Spirit. Then one evening while leading prayer he felt as if a surge of electric power had struck his head and diffused itself through his whole body. *For a little while, he stood speechless under the strange physical feeling. Then he said, "The Holy Spirit has come. We will begin preaching tomorrow evening." He closed the service with a hymn and dismissed the congregation, and came down from the pulpit; but no one left the house. The whole congregation had quietly resumed its seats. Instantly he realized the situation. The Holy Spirit had not only come to him, he had also taken possession of the hearts of the people. Immediately he began exhorting them to accept the gospel. They began to sob softly, like the falling of rain; then with deeper emotion to weep bitterly or to rejoice loudly, according to circumstance. It was midnight before he could dismiss his congregation* [quoted in Edwin Orr, *The Event of the Century*, p.40]. For eight full weeks, Girardeau preached to crowds that numbered 1500 to 2000, and many were converted. The pastor went off as a chaplain during the war, but at the end of the war the 1000 members, most of them newly free slaves, asked him to come back as pastor. They built the largest church in Charleston, which seated 1500, and Girardeau was the only person in the entire Southern Presbyterian Church to vote against segregating the churches.

You don't know what God could do at Harbor Church if we waited for his Spirit, if we really expected that the breath of God would give us life.

Paul takes that language from Ezekiel and applies it to individuals. How many of us are half-dead, going through life like zombies? How many of us have dead places inside of us, like men who've had heart attacks and half the muscle is now dead? How many of us have decided that there's just nothing in us that responds to this talk about Jesus? How many find it almost impossible to make that 18-inch journey from head to heart?

The breath of God is a warm wind hovering over the face of chaos; it blows where it will; but wherever it stops, it brings life. If we can't give ourselves life, let's at least be ready.