

Ezekiel 37:1-14 + Romans 8:6-11

life in the Spirit

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Sometime in late 60s Time magazine ran a cover: "Is God dead?" It was shocking enough to be a cultural marker that is now in the Smithsonian National museum of American History. They were wrong; at least for believers. God is not dead. This week's cover of Time asked: Is Truth dead? Let's hope they are wrong again, yet it does seem like the prophet Ezekiel is right around the corner. What else shall we call the Post-Truth era other than a *valley of dry bones*? When respect for the truth is replaced by something called alternate facts and vile speech becomes common, things are bleak. Every region of the country has people sinking into heroin and other opioid addictions, choosing death rather than life. Violence is pervasive, sexual groping is normalized and creation itself is threatened by reckless practices. Isn't that the very definition of a *spiritual wasteland*? The people cry out: "*Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there's nothing left of us.*" Is that cry coming from ancient Israel or Flint Michigan or Mosul Iraq or Washington DC? Is that cry then and there or here and now in our hearts in desperate need of God?

A friend of mine describes our condition as the *fragility of the flesh*. She doesn't mean that literal flesh is bad or necessarily frail. What she means by **flesh** is what Saint Paul means: living without any recognition of the Spirit of God. To live by the flesh is to be totally self concerned. "*Honestly,*" she says, "*it seems like our flesh has a massive design flaw, like a car that deserves a manufacturer's recall. Surely our maker must be tempted at times just to leave the heap by the side of the road and walk away. How many times do we expect to get rescued, to be towed back to the dealer? But again and again, God intervenes for our well-being. Our manufacturer has made a promise to us: God will keep the body, but put in a new engine. That's what I make of the promise in Ezekiel: "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.*" (Christine Chakoian, Christian Century March 28, 2017)

I can't say I completely like the analogy of a car without an engine to humanity at a loss. But I get her point. God has made us for a greater purpose than self annihilation. Without the Spirit of God, all of us are damaged. The living dead. A broken down car. A valley of dry bones; a vast spiritual wasteland.

When God asks: Can these bones live? Ezekiel is wise enough to say, "I have no idea. Only you know God."

The good news is God does know our condition. God knows that I am relentlessly inclined to my own fleshly ways that privilege my self-interests above all other interests. God knows that whenever I am completely preoccupied with my self, listening to no other and following its trail I end up off balance, to say the least, and usually down right miserable. God knows your

plight and mine, and marvelously does not abandon either of us to our own foolish ways. The good news is you are not doomed to live in a vast spiritual wasteland of your own making. Life in the flesh is to be a victim of the Dementors, those foul demonic characters in the Harry Potter saga, who suck the happiness out of people and leave them as living dead. That is the way of the flesh. It leads to the misery that we know so well and so all around us.

The good news is there is another way: the way of the Spirit, following Jesus whose Spirit brings life in the midst of misery.

What I find astonishing is that on any given day, you and I have the persistent opportunity to live in the Spirit, rather than the flesh. For Saint Paul there are only two paths to take. One is to set your mind and heart upon the Spirit. The other is to set your mind and heart on the flesh. (The "flesh" refers to a path that is antagonistic to the Spirit of life.) It seems much too simple to put it that way.

Yet the simplicity of the spiritual life is what makes it beautiful and compelling. It's not complicated, but it does require something of you. It does require you to consider your life with intention and attention to what matters most. You get to choose. What a gift! Our mortal life is all too brief, and briefer for some than others. **Just last week I heard from my friend that he may have two months to live or a bit longer if he chooses treatment for his cancer. That is utterly shocking. Yet, in a certain sense it's the same choice for each us each day. Each day you have no idea whether you will live two more months, or one day. How will you choose to live this day?**

When you actively choose to set your mind upon the way of Christ and follow Jesus' teachings throughout your day, there is a measure of deep peace that sustains you, under even the worst circumstances. The great Quaker theologian Howard Thurman famously said, "Do not ask what the world needs, ask what makes you come alive and do it; because what the world needs is people who have come alive." I believe Thurman was talking about life in the Spirit. There is a vitality to this way of life that is impossible in the way of the flesh.

Don't misunderstand. This is not a summons to perfection. It's no secret that we fail, and fall back upon the ways of the flesh. But your failure on any given day is only an occasion for forgiveness, and the chance to start over with a new set of learnings. Your failure becomes the opportunity to choose to live again in the Spirit who gives life. What's more remarkable is that the Spirit living in you brings forth fruit in world that is precisely what the world needs at any given moment. **The spiritual life is never about you alone. It's always about the way your life can be a channel for the Spirit of life blessing others through you.** This is how compassion and mercy, forgiveness and truth, love and kindness appear through your life as beautifully as blossoms in spring.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.