

“A House of Good Bones”

Gene McAfee

Forest Hill Church, Presbyterian

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

March 22, 2026

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The obituary said that she died after a brief illness. That was a true statement and also not true. The end was brief, but the illness was not. The cancer had arrived in a lump three years earlier, the breast was removed surgically, radiation was administered, life continued for a time, and then the cancer returned and the final illness was brief. She was 46 years old and she was my mother and I was eight. My father had died three years earlier.

When mom went into the hospital for the last time, my sisters had packed clothes for me in a paper shopping bag that accompanied me first to some in-town relatives and then out to Mae’s farm, where my four siblings had assembled for the end of our mother’s life and where I was told that it had ended. Life, as I knew it, had come apart, and had I been old enough to read the thirty-seventh chapter of the book of Ezekiel, I might have seen myself in a valley of dry bones, the skeletal remains of what had once been a life, a living reality.

We’ve all been there—when the phone call came or the relationship collapsed or life support was withdrawn or the promise was broken or the job disappeared or the dream vanished or the confusion became overwhelming—and suddenly the future seems to stop.

At some point, for all of us, life goes all to pieces and we are left with fragments that we don’t know what to do with.

Do we try to put things back together again, knowing, at some deep unspoken level that such a project is forlorn?

Do we walk away? If so, where do we go?

Do we lash out in anger and grief and fear? If so, are we making a bad situation worse?

Do we recriminate or self-recriminate? If so, on what charge?

Or do we simply sit in silent despair, at a loss not only for words but for the thoughts that might give birth to them?

We’ve all been there, where the prophet Ezekiel was in about the year 593 BCE, when the Holy Spirit took possession of him and opened his consciousness to a level of reality where desolation and hope mingle. And as is so often the case with us human beings, the desolation gets our attention first and hope has to catch up.

Ezekiel was spiritually looking at the ruin of the house of Israel—his people, God’s people. Five years earlier, the Babylonians had invaded and marched the creme of Judean

society into captivity, including the priest and prophet Ezekiel. Israel was in shambles when Ezekiel had his vision of dry bones, but even worse was to come. Five years later, with the remnant of Israel continuing to prove troublesome to their Babylonian occupiers, reinforcements moved in, and this time they razed Jerusalem to the ground, destroying not only David's palace, but, much more important, Solomon's temple, that physical structure that housed Israel's identity as the people of God. For Israel, it was a catastrophe without equal until the Holocaust in Central Europe twenty-six centuries later. The prophet was being shown, through the power of the Spirit, the grim reality of what was and what was to come. Life with God is not always easy; sometimes it's a struggle.

And since priests in ancient Israel were forbidden to come into contact with human remains, for Ezekiel to be deposited in a valley full of human bones was for him a defiling horror beyond his imagining. And not only was he shown the bones, he was forced, by God's Spirit, to walk among them, repeatedly making him more and more ritually unclean and thereby cut off from performing his priestly functions. Ezekiel the priest was being stripped of his identity as the bones had been stripped of theirs.

"Can these bones live, Human One?"

Ezekiel is not addressed by his name or by his office; in the midst of this stripped-down scattering of humankind, he has become one of them: simply a human one, and the question is not rhetorical. It is a test of theological imagination.

No human one, then and there, knew the answer to that question, and so the prophet carefully demurs: "Ah, Sovereign God, only you know."

And that's a true statement: only God knows. It's more than an expression; it's a statement of one of life's deepest truths: only God knows. The future belongs to God, and none of us can say, before disaster strikes or when we are in the midst of it, what that future will be.

We are living in one of those times now, on multiple levels, when the only honest answer about the question of our future is: only God knows.

None of us knows what this country will be four years or eight years from now, or even indefinitely if a declaration of emergency is the excuse to suspend our constitutional rights.

None of us knows how far or how destructively the war with Iran will spread, although it's already moved into Lebanon and the Gulf region. Is the American-Israeli coalition launching World War III? Is that idea unthinkable?

9-11 was unthinkable until it happened. The stock market crashing was unthinkable until it happened. The *Titanic* sinking was unthinkable until it happened. The scale of the carnage of warfare in the last century was unthinkable until it happened, and somewhere between 160 and 230 million people were dead because of it.

Can these bones live?

That really depends to a very great degree on what bones we're talking about. If we're talking about the same-old same-old geopolitics as usual—same game, same rules, similar patriarchal players—the answer is no, these bones will not live in any sustained way. They will live only until the next disaster of human making comes along—and there will be one—and we repeat the cycle of building up inattention, selfishness, exploitation, oppression, and discrimination that eventually erupts in violence that leaves mountains of destruction and valleys of dry bones.

But if we're talking about bones of another sort—those structural elements that remain intact after the surface has been decimated or imploded or simply decayed—then yes, it's possible that they can live again. That's what can happen when, as we say, a house has good bones: with love, hard work, and the grace of God, something that was once beautiful can emerge again, bit by bit, sinew by sinew, bone by bone, as Ezekiel foresaw. Not through business as usual, but through a radical reordering of our priorities and a radical opening of our spiritual eyes to God's perspective on God's beloved creation.

"These bones are the whole house of Israel," God told the prophet, and the house of Israel was the religious counterpart to the house of David. In the Bible, the people of Israel, true Israel, are God's people, they're not David's people, they're not Solomon's people, they're not even Israel's people. They do not belong to themselves, to a geopolitical entity called "Israel," ancient or modern. The people of God belong to God. That's the skeletal framework on which every superstructure has to be built if it's not to become part of that cycle of violence and rubble. The people of God living their lives **as** the people of God are the good bones of that dwelling not made with hands.

And it's not always easy to see that as we read the stories about Israel in the Bible, where it looks like anyone with a pulse who resides within certain boundaries is part of Israel. The historical reality was more complicated than that, and the theological reality was even more complicated.

Lots of people resided within those boundaries—beginning with the indigenous population known as Canaanites, today known as Palestinians, who were never completely displaced by the tribes of Israel—as well as slaves, resident foreigners, and the constant stream of traders and travelers moving along the Fertile Crescent from Asia Minor, Mesopotamia, and Egypt.

In the midst of all of that complexity, some heard a voice saying, "You are mine, you are Israel, the ones who struggle with God," and a great deal of biblical literature concerns itself with that very question—Who truly is "Israel"?—and some of the attempts to answer this question were the driving forces that produced the New Testament. We'll study those attempts in greater detail later this spring when we study Professor Julie Galambush's book, *The Reluctant Parting*.

It was no easy thing to be biblical Israel—"the one who struggles with God," as the name actually means—just as it is no easy thing to be the ones who struggle with God today. We Christians are the heirs of that ongoing struggle, and we sometimes encounter disasters, usually of our own making, that reduce us to such a shell of our accomplishments and

institutions and former selves that the question forces itself into our consciousness: Can these bones live? Can God restore to a living, breathing reality what truly belongs to God?

The answer given the priest-prophet Ezekiel is yes and the task for us is to determine what role we play in that process of restoration in our time and in our place. Unlike new homeowners, who can claim the good bones of a structure for themselves, we who are stewards of God's house—the body of Christ, the people of God, the line of those who struggle with God—we don't claim ownership; ours is custodianship and nothing more. Our job is to care for, to provide for, and to love that which belongs to God, and to look with God's perspective on those good bones that God can restore to life when everything appears to be hopeless and we appear to be helpless. We are not helpless; as Ezekiel saw, God is merely a breath away.

Next week, on Palm Sunday, we will recognize during worship the work of two committees who have been working to help this church through this time of transition in pastoral leadership.

We will thank and say farewell to the Mission Study Committee, whose work is done. Their Report will form the basis of the profile of this church that will be circulated publicly by the Pastor Nominating Committee, whom we will also recognize next week as they take up their responsibilities. With the assistance of the Rev. Arvid Whitmore, our liaison with the presbytery, both of these committees have worked deliberately and conscientiously to help this church remain the living, breathing, vibrant community of faith God is calling it to be. Those committees are some of those good bones that provide structure and integrity during this period of unknowing.

But there are other such good bones in this place, as well, and I would ask you in the coming weeks and months to pray for God's Spirit to open your eyes to see what those structural elements might be for Forest Hill Church. They don't have to be the same programs and policies and procedures and personnel that have been here for what appears to be forever. This is a time for imaginative openness to the movement of the Spirit. What may have worked in the past for Forest Hill Church may not work in the future, and that's fine if everyone here is listening to the still small voice that spoke to the prophets, over and over again, and if we create a space here where people feel safe enough to share what they hear of God's voice.

And then, when you say your daily prayers, ask God to show you what role you will play in that creative and imaginative work when this "house of Israel" has a settled pastor again to shepherd and support you. You who are attuned to the Spirit's voice—you, too, are among those good bones that make up this house of prayer for all people. In your groundedness in God's love and in your being built upon the foundation of Jesus the Christ, you provide the structural integrity that shelters the flame of the Holy Spirit that gives light and warmth to a broken and suffering world. That privilege and responsibility belong to you, and your next minister's job is to recognize that integrity, nurture it, and love it. And, with God's help, your bones will live.

We conclude our worship with hymn number 192.