



# University Christian Church

(Disciples of Christ)  
Austin, Texas

University Christian Church – Austin

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## **You Shall Live!**

Lent 5, a, March 9, 2008

Ezekiel 37-1-14

I need you to take you back a little earlier in the story, a little farther back than the children described in their anthem for the day. Yes, as the children told us, Ezekiel was a prophet among the Hebrew people in the few years time between the Babylonians captured the territory of Israel and took many – including Ezekiel – into captivity in Babylon, but before the total destruction of Jerusalem in the year 586 BCE.

But in order to get a proper understanding of the drama that takes place in chapter 37 of our reading today, we need to first stop and recognize that in the preceding 36 1/2 chapters of Ezekiel verse after verse, page after page ( 56 pages in my Bible!) we have almost nothing but invective against the people of Israel for their unfaithfulness to God. Over and over again, the word of the Lord comes to the prophet Ezekiel, which he faithfully proclaims, a word of the coming total destruction of their property and their homeland, repeated predictions of the fall and devastation of Jerusalem. The protestations from God via the mouth of Ezekiel was that all this was due to the people's unfaithfulness and their unwillingness to submit to the guidance of God. So reading through Ezekiel is emotionally hard work. It is painful. It is maddening. For 36 1/2 chapters there is essentially nothing but doom.

And then in the second half of the 36th chapter we hear a sudden breaking of the dark clouds and a bit of sunlight, of hope, begins to shine.<sup>i</sup>

And then in the first real words of hope for the scattered Hebrew people in exile for long:

36: 24 I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land.

25 I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.

26 A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

27 I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

28 Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.

In fact the promise is that the coming days will be better than the former days

35 “and they shall say, this land that was desolate is become like the Garden of Eden; and a waste desolate and ruined cities are become fenced and are inhabited.”

With this background and with the incessant drumbeat in the prophet Ezekiel's own life over the course of years where there was nothing but doomed to pronounce, we might better understand how it is that when we enter chapter 37 we find a prophet who is confused about what he is to believe. The prophet is taken out into a valley -- either in actuality or in the midst of a vision, it actually makes no difference which -- and he is presented in this valley of dry bones clearly representing the death, the spiritual desiccation, of the people of Israel. And after the panoply of gloom and doom, in a word that must have come difficultly to his

lips he prophesies, “Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you and you shall live.”

37:12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

13 And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

When we hear the talk of bones coming back to life, of graves opening and people living again, you and I have framework to understand that concept. We, after all, are a resurrection people! But in Ezekiel’s day, resurrection was concept that the Hebrew people had not begun to accept. Scholars tells us that beyond these words in Ezekiel, there are only two places in all of the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament- where the resurrection theme is actually expounded:

The first is in an ecstatic fit of poet flash that bursts forth from Isaiah 26:19:

“Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.”

And then, also, in Daniel 12:2, in a prophecy of the end of time“2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.”

And then our Ezekiel passage, by means of a vision, imagining the almost unimaginable that God would, indeed, restore the Israelites to the land, and even more, an even better relationship with God for their future.

But you probably know that each week our lectionary readings planned out by an ecumenical team of Christian scholars, pull together 4 passages for our reflection in worship. And the Gospel lesson for today, that is matched up with

this Ezekiel passage, is in John 11:1-8, 17- 44, wherein Jesus- who is on his way to Jerusalem makes it to Jerusalem's suburban village, Bethany, too late to heal and save the life of his friend, Lazarus. Lazarus has been in the tomb for 4 days when Jesus arrives, and his sister....

21 Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.

22 But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."

23 Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."

24 Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

25 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,

26 and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

27 She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

And you know that Lazarus is then brought back to life. Dead bones, without the *ruah* (Hebrew), the *pneuma* (Gk) are revived to full life, a new life, by the command of Jesus! Certainly as the author of the Gospel of John is telling the story there is a clear pre-figuring of Jesus own resurrection, a hint of his power! It is an authoritative statement of the power to bring new life from out of the reality of death - that power of God that the early Christian church was expressing here in the Gospel of John.

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For us this morning it is this new life -- its possibilities and potential -- that we celebrate in the baptism of Susan Mendenhall Cassano; and in our own baptisms. It is the experience of death and the hoped-for new life that -- too- we embrace and celebrate.

For the waters of baptism are the waters of death. Though many of the cultures of the ancient Mideast quickly took to boats and ships sailed the

Mediterranean Sea: explored new cultures; benefitting from trade and the military benefits of a navy, that's not our heritage. Our heritage was a land loving people. Land was safe. The sea was chaos. <sup>ii</sup>

Our people -- our ancestors in faith, never took to the sea like the neighbors to the north and the south and the west did.

Our people feared the Leviathan of the deep.

Our people told stories of Noah being swallowed by a great fish -- dangerous business.

Our people didn't like the water. It was dangerous. It was the embodiment of chaos and death.

Another way that that's expressed in the Gospels of Mark and of Luke, as well. Do you recall Jesus asking the disciples if they can endure the baptism he is going to endure? The baptism that he is going to endure is his death. Baptism is death. Death of the old in order for the new to be born.

So when the apostle Paul bids us die with Jesus Christ, it is fitting that we do so by going down into the chaotic, dangerous waters of baptism. Dying and water go hand-in-hand.

Rom. 6:3-5

3 Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?

4 Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

5 For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

In baptism we celebrate death is the pathway to life. And the life that we celebrate is the life that we find in discipleship to Jesus Christ. It is our death of the old self in order that we might follow Christ.

You heard Susan make the confession not long ago, that she intends to follow “the living Christ.” The Christ who died, but was born to a new life and bids us do the same.

The living Christ who will guide her in decision-making.

Who will comfort her at times of loss.

Who will open doors for her into fresh, new experiences of the divine presence.

Who promises her life eternal -- that is a life at the end of this earthly life; and a higher life, a better life right here right now.

It is a bold thing to be baptized! It is even a bolder thing to be baptized when one such as Susan has been on a long and involved, and fruitful, spiritual journey; who has learned many things and is ready still to identify this guide, who will lead her forward, henceforth; a guide named Jesus the Christ.

“You shall live” is the promise we hear in Ezekiel.

You shall live is the promise Jesus makes to Martha to Mary to Lazarus, to Susan, to you, and to me.

On the other side of death.... is life.

On the other side of struggle..... is peace.

On the other side of humility and brokenness..... is a satisfaction in the fullness too rich for words. When we undergo a transformation such as promised us, there is no slapping on the back, no self-congratulation, because as Ezekiel first glimpsed and Jesus taught, it is not in our work that we are saved. It is God's work.

GRACE. And it is God's work on our behalf because of God's undying, unflinching, uplifting love for everyone of us!

**YOU SHALL LIVE!**

For this love, above all else, may Praise always be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> Interesting, the first word of hope actually is said to the mountains of Israel  
In chapter 36: 10-12, Ezekiel is speaking for the Lord, first to the mountains of Israel.

8 But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot out your branches, and yield your fruit to my people Israel; for they shall soon come home.

9 See now, I am for you; I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown;

10 and I will multiply your population, the whole house of Israel, all of it; the towns shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt;

11 and I will multiply human beings and animals upon you. They shall increase and be fruitful; and I will cause you to be inhabited as in your former times, and will do more good to you than ever before. Then you shall know that I am the LORD.

12 I will lead people upon you--my people Israel--and they shall possess you, and you shall be their inheritance. No longer shall you bereave them of children.

<sup>ii</sup> Gen 1:1 “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept **over the face of the waters.**”  
Those waters were chaos!