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Sermon Title: Is My Name There?
Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-10
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Ezekiel 37:1-10

The Valley of Dry Bones

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these 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 put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

That's a very powerful Scripture, isn't it? Ezekiel 37. "The Valley of Dry Bones," we call it. God takes Ezekiel into a valley filled with bones, bones left over from some long-ago battle, bones from dead soldiers left unceremoniously where they dropped, bleached by the hot Middle Eastern sun. And God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?"

It's a good question we all ask when we are faced with something that seems broken, done, over, finished, dead, lifeless, hopeless, despairing. *Can these bones live?*

This is the only political thing I'm going to say, so let me get it out of the way here at the beginning. I don't mind if people say, "President Obama stinks." I don't mind people saying, "Newt Gingrich stinks," "Michele Bachmann stinks," or anybody running for President stinks. Opinion, even crude or rude opinion, is fair game. What scares me – and I mean that literally – what scares me is when people get apocalyptic – and I mean that literally – when people say, as they have, that America cannot survive four more years of this, that, or the other person, or this, that, or the other party. That suggests fragility in America, a transience, a weakness, a fatal flaw that doesn't ring a bell with me when I think about America. America is a lot of things. It is a place. It is an idea. It is a hope. It is NOT some fly-by-night name on a map.

I keep hearing the term "American exceptionalism," but some people who say it don't seem to really believe it! Because for them it's *American exceptionalism* ... except if the wrong person, the wrong party, the wrong policy holds sway.

What got me thinking about this was outside the windows, right there, 6,096 flags, 6,096 names, men and women, our sacred treasure, our nation's children, all killed in horrific warfare against a horrific enemy. All volunteers, every single one of them, and all quite aware of what they were up against. No one in battle expected a cakewalk.

When we went into Afghanistan, we were up against the very enemy that created 9/11, an enemy capable of anything. When we went into Iraq, there were fears of chemical warfare; there were abundant unknowns, a harsh desert terrain, a brutal army, an angry and uncertain population. Yet, these soldiers, the very ones named and honored outside our church windows, they went, they fought, they tried, they gave their all, they gave their best, they gave their lives. And not one of them thought that America was so weak, so fragile that one election could end it all.

I keep hearing phrases like, "We live in a post-Christian, post-Western, post-modern, post-America," as if our ideals and values have been lost, we're done for, our age is past, we are in such decline that there is no reversal. Such thinking mocks the sacrifice so evident outside our church windows. They did what they did because they had the courage to believe in the BEST that humanity can be.

I was up at the Yale University bookstore this week and saw two books I'd like to read, but I haven't had time to do it yet, so I just stood there in the book aisle reading the jackets and the blurbs on the back. One of them, by a Navy SEAL, is called *The Heart and the Fist: The education of a humanitarian, the making of a Navy SEAL*, in which the author, Eric Greitens, framed his whole military service within the desire to do the maximum good possible, the maximum humanitarian good. The other was called *Hitler and America* by Klaus P. Fischer, and it made the point that Hitler underestimated the power of the Anglo-American message of democratic freedom. Hitler couldn't grasp that even his own people, given the chance, would choose our values over his, and when they had the chance, they grabbed hold. They've stuck, and they're spreading.

We've watched the so-called "Arab Spring" the last six months: revolutions against tyranny upending Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and perhaps more to come. To my chagrin, actually, to my embarrassment and consternation, some folks, powerful folks with influential voices, have rooted against these rebellions, preferring the tyranny and oppression of old despots. It's as though they don't really believe in the power of the very ideas they proclaim: freedom, democracy, dignity, opportunity.

Fortunately, our Founding Fathers had a greater vision, a greater sense of world history, a greater optimism; they boldly dared to call those values "inalienable rights," God-given rights. It's as though they were saying that God has planted within each human breast the yearning to be free, and in being free to be our best.

That's part of the universal attraction of the Bible. God is always trying to help us to be our best because truth is, God believes in us. God made us in his "own image," the Bible says. "*Before you were born I set you apart,*" God says. (Jeremiah 1:5) Collectively, taken together, God imagines us as a "Holy Nation." And like the soldiers outside our church windows, God's love even died for us, in Christ. God must think very highly of us. I think that's catching on. I think our idea of inalienable God-given rights is catching on. To mock it, to root against it, mocks the sacrifice so evident outside our church windows.

Ten years ago, our nation went to war. The first thing we did as a church was gather a group of veterans, World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, and we asked them pointblank: what should we do as a church? How can we best "support the troops"? How can we avoid the divisiveness of Viet Nam and care for our soldiers, regardless of our politics? That's motivated us for 10 years.

I remember the first memorial service we had, when our war dead reached 1,000. It was the middle of the summer, a Wednesday night. Alida printed out the names of all 1,000 soldiers; the pages filled the walls between the windows. In the hours before the service, I walked along the wall, reading the names, finding my fingers stopping here and there on one name or another. I sat down and wrote this poem.

Is My Name There?

(Daniel 12:1; Psalm 147:4)

Is my name there?
I scan the list, one, two, three
six thousand and more
looking for a familiar name
or town
or age
Is my name there?
A Rowe or two?
Yes, there are, two,
and Davids here and there
across the page
and, to my surprise,
men of my age
and women, too.
Look on,
is your name there?
Your father's name,
a family name, perhaps,
different but the same,
like Pokorney and Pokorny,
Torres and Torrez with a "z,"
Hunt and Hunte with an "e,"
James Lambert and James Lambert Three
and too many Smiths
almost as many Johnsons.
Ah, my name –
My grandfather's name
and my mother's.
Yes, my name is there,
among all the others

*Written for a Memorial Service in memory of soldiers killed in Afghanistan and Iraq ... with the number
in line three changing every year.*

Since then, since that first service, we've done everything we could to keep this personal. We've given mountains of food and stuff, and a lot of money, and big batches of books and Bibles to a group called "Project from the Heart," so they can send care packages to all the soldiers. By name. The first year we did it, we delivered a whole vanload of goodies, and the lady in charge said to Alida, "You got a minute? Come inside, I want you to read an e-mail we just got from a soldier in Iraq." Alida went inside. The e-mail was from a kid who grew up in our SPF.

We've also had a bunch of soldiers come through here and speak to our church, our youth, our community, from majors to privates, from 19 years old to 50. Every single one of them, every one was hopeful, optimistic, and even proud, not of battlefield courage, but of what he or she was trying to do. We can argue war. We can argue strategy. We can argue politics. But in here and out there on the lawn, outside our church windows, we don't argue. We remember. We honor. We love. And, we choose to embrace their hopefulness.

That's where we come in. On Memorial Day weekend *The New York Times* had an in-depth front-page article on what it's like for soldiers coming home. The scars. The memories. The family dynamics. Economic realities. Re-entry. Wounded heroes, wounded in many ways, heroes in many ways:

One soldier came running down the steps of the plane onto the tarmac, yelling, "I love America!" Another, "Sgt. Brian Keith boarded the plane home feeling a strange dread. His wife wanted a divorce and had moved away, taking their son and most of their bank account with her. At the end of his flight lay an empty apartment and the blank slate of a new life. 'A lot of people were excited about coming home,' Sergeant Keith said. 'Me, I just sat there and I wondered: What am I coming back to?'" (Dao, James. "After Combat, the Unexpected Perils of Coming Home." *The New York Times* 28 May 2011: A1. Print.)

That's where we come in. WE are what they come back to, the living and the dead. We set the tone: good or bad, optimistic or pessimistic, positive or negative, "one nation, under God, indivisible", or one nation, over the hill, close to the abyss, in irreversible decline.

Well, let's end by going back to the beginning, to Ezekiel, and the Valley of Dry Bones. That was a wasteland. No place could be more despairing. Yet, God said to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel was smart enough NOT to underestimate God. Ezekiel says, "Thou knowest." That's the Old Testament equivalent of the New Testament belief, "With God all things are

possible." Then God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones, to call to the winds, to breathe life into the bones, and it happened! I think that's our task, to emerge from this time of war, breathing the promise of life with hope and conviction, uniting us in the greatness God expects from us.

Let me close with this. Lots and lots of people have come to our Field of Flags. They sit there, stand there, pray there; they read the poem, "Is My Name There?" They contact me, and they promise to keep it personal, by name; and they write notes and letters to soldiers that will go out in the next batch of care packages. I've been reading those notes. Our people thank them for "hard work, dedication, strength, selflessness, kind hearts, courage, sacrifice," and our people promise them "love, blessing, understanding, gratitude, and more love." And one youngster wrote, "I love you. You are my best friend."

That kid doesn't think America is over. The soldier who reads it doesn't think America is over. For that kid, and that soldier ... and for us, the best is ahead