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Date: September 11, 2011
Sermon Title: Can These Bones Live?
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.

In early August I took three days to escape up into the mountains, the Berkshires, hiding out in Williamstown to finalize all my preparations for the new church year, knowing that this year everything would begin on the second Sunday in September. September 11, 9/11, the 10th anniversary of 9/11.

This is the day, historically, when we toss off the sleepy lethargy of summer and start everything up in earnest. And for 20 years or more, that has meant the Deacons' annual all-church picnic. We open up Sunday School, the church gets full once again, we're back to our busy schedule, the choir is in the choir loft ... and just outside the church windows, the Deacons are firing up the grill; the bouncy games are all inflated, the ice cream truck will be here soon; the smell of burgers will start wafting into the sanctuary, and in a few moments, the Sunday School kids and teachers will parade into church, filling us with a visual reminder that life goes on, that the future is already unfolding, that tomorrow truly is filled with promise, that whatever this church has stood for for 300 years is still true, and still strong and still vital and still needed.

So, sitting up there at a little table overlooking the Berkshires, I prepared for the energy and enthusiasm of today ... knowing full well that today would also be 9/11, not just Deacons' Picnic Sunday, not just the official reopening of everything. But also September 11: 10 years to the day of that most horrific day. Unexpected. Inexplicable. Unimaginable, Evil. And I tried to hold these two events, those two feelings together — 9/11 and Picnic Sunday.

I kept hearing this one verse pounding in my head, Psalm 121:
I lift up my eyes to the hills — from where will my help come? My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

There is something about looking up. There is something about mountains and hills and tree lines off in the distance that lift our eyes up, that draw our attention out and above and beyond ourselves that are forever and universally inspiring.

That is the challenge of 9/11: we have to determine whether 9/11 takes us backward or moves us forward and even miraculously lifts us upward. Are we forever defined by 9/11? Are we forever scarred? Forever afraid? Forever angry?

If our daughter marries a Muslim, if our grandchild studies Arabic, if our new neighbor is from Saudi Arabia, if our work takes us to Damascus, if we holiday in Turkey, if the person in front of us at the airport wears a burqa, if the convenience store owner's name is Mohammed, if 3,000 Muslims show up at Rye Playland and want to ride the roller coaster ... how will we respond?

Will life ever return to normal? Or, to put it in the language of today's Scripture lesson, "Can these bones live?" The Scripture is one of the great

graphic, memorable, vivid Old Testament stories. Elijah is taken into the "Valley of Dry Bones," a valley filled with the bleached bones of thousands of dead soldiers. An awesome, no-doubt troubling sight. On one of my visits to the Czech Republic, I was taken to a unique church, an "ossuary," they call it, a gigantic collection of bones made into a church. Everything in the church is made of human bones: the chandeliers, the cross, the altar. Plus several enormous cages, piled high with skulls and bones. I didn't like it.

Those of you who have been to Paris perhaps visited the Catacombs — same thing. The bones of tens of thousands of long-dead Parisians gathered now for tourists to gawk at. When we were in Paris in May, I refused to go.

And I would not have wanted to be with Elijah in the Valley of Dry Bones, a place of death, food for vultures and wolves. This was no Gettysburg or Normandy, places of national heroes and dignified remembrance and even sacred beauty. The Valley of Dry Bones was a national disaster, a place of death and nothing more. I can't imagine Elijah's frame of mind: Despair? Disgust? Revenge? "Get me out of here"? And then, to his utter amazement, God asks Elijah, "Can these bones live?" Is there life after this disaster, or is this the end? Is the valley forever scarred, the nation forever dismembered, the dead forever ... dead?

Or, "Can these bones live?" Can life ever spring forth from this place of death? Can laughter and smiles and joy and fun and even love and birth and new life emerge from the horrors of this day of death?

"Can these bones live?" In our own country? Can the nation survive, prosper, rejoice ... ever again?

"Can these bones live?" ... after Pearl Harbor? After D-Day? After Antietam? After the Battle of the Somme? After any or all of the "days that shall live on in infamy"? "Can these bones live?"

Last week I had Nick Kapetan's funeral, with his burial down at Oak Lawn Cemetery. Next to his grave was a headstone with an unusual verse of Scripture: "This is the day the Lord has made! Let us rejoice and be glad in it." Think about that. The headstone commemorates the day of death. The people who gather round a headstone are the people most deeply saddened by the death. So imagine, there the people are, grief-stricken, heartbroken, sorrowful, maybe angry, maybe bitter, maybe their faith is shaken. And there's their loved one, and here's the casket ... and there's the headstone, declaring, "This is the day — this, this very one — this is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice. Let us be glad." God asks his question, "Can these

bones live?" And from beyond the grave, the gentleman at Oaklawn Cemetery dares to proclaim, "Yes, I live. This day. Rejoice. Be glad."

Sometimes we can learn a lot by looking far away. When 9/11 happened, the world watched us to see how we would respond. We've just finished looking at the Valley of Dry Bones, Israel, 2,500 years ago. Now, think with me back to late July, to Norway, 4,000 miles away, to their massacre of the innocents, over 70 people, mostly kids, killed by a gunman. *The New York Times* carried a lovely column written by a Norwegian author, wondering, just as we have in this country, as to whether we could ever go back, can we ever recapture our innocence, our inherent optimism, our unity of spirit and purpose? At the end he wrote,

"After the bomb went off ... and reports of the shootings out on the island of Utoya began to come in, I asked my daughter whether she was scared. She replied by quoting something I had once said to her: 'Yes, but if you're not scared, you can't be brave.' So if there is no road back to how things used to be ... there is a road forward. To be brave. To keep on as before. To turn the other cheek as we ask: 'Is that all you've got?' To refuse to let fear change the way we build our society." (Nesbo, Jo. "In Norway, the Past Is a Foreign Country." *The New York Times* 26 July 2011. Print.)"

In other words, he believes the bones of Norway can live again, that flesh and muscle, and yes, more, that spirit and voice and energy and strength can live again.

That's what I believe for America. I do believe that God's purpose for America, God's desire for America, is as vibrant and vital today as ever in our history. We have been the testing ground for the greatest ideals and tenets and bedrocks of our faith and principles of our faith. Freedom. Opportunity. Equality. Grace. Peace. And hope. Forgiveness. Second Chances. Reconciliation. Charity. Compassion. Doing good. Going the extra mile. All big words and grand concepts, and all have had extraordinary flowering and flourishing in this land. And we refuse to confine that to the dustbin of history.

There's a strange little story in the Bible, the aftermath of Sodom and Gomorrah. Those ancient twin cities were destroyed by the original fire and brimstone, except for a man named Lot. Lot and his family escape the tribulation and make it to safety — almost. Almost. Everyone makes it except Lot's wife. The Bible tells us, "She looked back. And was turned into a pillar of salt." She looked back. And became immovable. She looked back. Stuck in the past. She looked back. There were sorrow and grief and evil and horror back over her shoulder ... there were life and hope and love straight

ahead. But she could not or would not move in that direction. That's the choice we have.

And we're not the first. I've read two fascinating novels this summer, both quite powerful, quite inspiring, and both by young writers, too young to know that much, to be that good about their chosen topic. Turns out I was right. In both instances, these terrific young writers took their inspiration from their grandparents, in one case the grandparents' stories; in the other case the grandparents' diaries. In each case they found strength and lessons and courage in those people we now call the "Greatest Generation." We see in them a resilience, an optimism, a determination, a power that would not be defeated, not by the Depression, not by World War II, not by the threats of communism, nuclear war, or any great evil. They refused to be turned into pillars of salt made from bitter tears from yesterday's fears. They forged ahead.

So I'm up there in the Berkshires, beauty and inspiration all around me. I'm working hard on everything to get ready for the fall — thinking, writing, planning, studying. And after a while, I just need a break! I just need some mindless entertainment. Some amusement. I remember my father's teaching me as a kid about the evils of television. "It's just 'amusement,'" he scorned. "Amusement," from the Greek: "a," meaning "without," "muse," meaning "thinking." A-muse-ment. Without thinking, non-thinking. Mindless.

Perfect! I decided that's just what I needed! So I went to see "Captain America," the summer movie that reveals the origins of the great superhero, Captain America. Pearl Harbor happened. World War II was raging. A great evil was unleashed upon the world, and our would-be superhero was just a 90-pound weakling on the streets of Brooklyn, rejected by the Army, 4-F, no matter how hard he tried. But a scientist sees something in him. Some inner greatness, some hidden strengths. So the scientist asks him, "Do you want to kill Nazis?" And the boy says, "I don't want to kill anybody! I just don't like bullies." With that, the scientist takes him under his wing, and he becomes Captain America, taking on the bullies of the world, all those ideological braggarts who want to rule the world their way, who want to bully their way to power over your mind, over your faith, over your freedom.

Yesterday's "bullies," today's "terrorists." Same idea. And so on 9/11, Captain America has been called into action these past ten years. Once again, our brightest and best, our heart and soul, our pride and joy, our children and grandchildren, Captains America, all, have faced up to the bullies.

And we've honored them, and remembered them, 6,100 flags planted on our lawns this summer for every fallen soldier. Five memorial services to pray for our dead. Mountains of care packages sent to our soldiers. Prayers offered every Sunday for 520 straight weeks since that first 9/11 so long ago. And yet, it seems like only yesterday.

You may remember that day, that week, that week of weeks. We gathered right here, didn't we? We filled this church, day after day, night after night. We sang, we prayed, we cried. We went to war, we died some more. And today, we've sung, we've prayed, we've cried some more. All to the good. Yes ... I said, "all to the good." I have to believe that. I choose to believe that.

I remember what it was like that Sunday in Iraq, when the people of Iraq went to vote for the first time, freely, and at great personal risk. They emerged from the voting places with purple-tipped fingers held high to show they'd voted. I remember how we all felt that Sunday here in church. All to the good. I remember the soldiers Alida brought in to speak to our church and to our young people and the tears they shed as they told about building schools and giving toys and providing the chance for people to live free. All to the good. I remember the money we sent to two 9/11 widows up in Boston who sent their money and our money to help widows in Afghanistan. All to the good.

When the scientist is trying to convince the 90-pound weakling from Brooklyn to become Captain America, he tells him that the key is a secret serum that he'll have to take. "It makes bad people worse," the scientist says, "and makes the good in us better." That's my prayer for America. September 11 was a serum. It showed us a side of evil we could not imagine. But it can make the good in us even better.

In Christian terminology that serum is Jesus. When we look at the world through the eyes of Jesus Christ, the bad is worse, and the good is better. We see evil for what it really is: the injustice, oppression, poverty, hatred, violence, fear. We take that all personally, which is why we strive so hard against it. But the good is also better, which is why we strive so hard for it.

Two weeks ago we had that rotten hurricane, didn't we? Destructive. Ugly. Washed out bridges. Flooded roads. Lost homes, Fallen trees. Power gone. World turned dark and bleak. But we still had church! You may remember we sent out an "e-mail church service" to everyone on Saturday so you could stay safe at home and still worship. Yet, Sunday morning, we got up and came to church, threw open the doors, lit some candles. A handful of sturdy travelers joined together for worship. As part of the sermon, I asked

our little group, "What do you do when facing a crisis?" How do you get through it?" One of our hardy group said, "I drive through the storm and get to church." It was a glorious answer, filled with metaphors and symbols, priceless and true on so many levels. *We drive through the storm and get to church.*

That's what we did 10 years ago on September 11, 2001. Together, with all the hurts and emotions, fears and anger, loss and grief, shock and rage, we drove through the storm, we got to church, we came to this safe harbor, we came to the embrace of God's love made so real by our common faith and our common goodness. We came through that storm and got to church, and today we are a stronger people, a greater people, a people of greater love, greater faith, and greater good.