



“This is the Story...”

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Week 23: God’s Breath is Hope

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Intro Video: <https://youtu.be/QD9UlrCziUc>

Review the big story: God created the cosmos and humans and called it all good. We were created to live in harmony, but sometimes we miss the mark. All of humanity missed the mark, and they had to live with the consequences, but God stuck with them and continued to love them. Then God called a family to be a blessing to the whole earth. Like the humans before them, the generations of this family often missed the mark, but God was faithful. When the people became slaves in Egypt, God raised up Moses to be their leader. God performed many signs and wonders, and delivered them from slavery. In the wilderness, they learned to be a people of God, trusting in God’s provision, living out God’s commandments, and wrestling with the law in shalom community. As they prepared to go into the promised land, they were given the shema, words of love to keep with their whole beings. God gave the people a new leader, Joshua, and through miraculous works brought the people into the promised land. Once there, they had to learn again how to be God’s people. They missed the mark a lot, and God sent judges to guide them. Ordinary people showed creativity and steadfast love in the way they continued the story of the people of God. When the people demanded a king, God sent prophets like Samuel to try to keep the people faithful to God. Kings Saul, David and Solomon continued to miss the mark, and the kingdom divided into the north (Israel) and the south (Judah). Leaders and prophets like Elijah, Huldah, Josiah and Jeremiah were how God stuck with the people and continued to call the people back to God, even as first the northern, and then the southern kingdom fell to invading powers. After the kingdoms fell, the people were scattered. Some were left in the ruins of the kingdoms, and some were sent into exile in foreign lands.

- **Key verse:** Ezekiel 37:14

Tell the story: The kingdom that Saul, David and Solomon ruled is over. The people have been scattered. Some were taken into captivity in surrounding nations. Some were left in the ruins of their homeland. We call this scattering of the people the “diaspora.” They were under the rule of foreign powers. Things would never be the same. It was a big, defining time for the people of God. Prophets like Ezekiel continued to try to pull the people together and call them back to God. Ezekiel was a strange guy who had some strange visions (kind of like dreams). This story is one of those visions. In it, the Spirit of God took him to a valley of dry (very dead) bones, and told him to prophesy to them. Ezekiel did, and the bones came back together, not just like dancing skeletons but with actual skin connecting them. God told Ezekiel that just like these hopeless bones could be put back together and brought to life, the people who were feeling hopeless and disconnected could be put back together and brought back.

- Read Ezekiel 37:1-14
- Read page 146 in the *Shine On* story Bible

Prime the pump:

- **Things to notice:**

- Notice how many times you see the words “spirit,” “wind” and “breath” in this passage. All of these come from the Hebrew word ruah (or ruach). Do you remember that word? Look all the way back at Genesis 1... Read the passage paying attention to where ruah pops up, and see how that changes or deepens the way you read the story.
- Notice other parallels to the Genesis 1-2 story. How does this change the story?

- **Background information:**

- “Ezekiel is surely the strangest of all the prophets.” (*Alter, Robert. 2019. The Hebrew Bible, vol. 2: Prophets. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, pg. 1049.*) Many prophets were considered to ride the borders of insanity, but Ezekiel is in a class of his own. It is helpful as we read Ezekiel to remember that his prophecies have a hallucinatory quality to them.
- When Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, those of the elite classes were exiled, while the more common people remained in Judah. Ezekiel, of a priestly family, was placed in exile, and that is where his visions take place.
- The NRSV translates the Hebrew *hayil* in verse 10 as “vast multitude.” But its meaning has military connotations, so Robert Alter suggests that “legion” is a better translation. Read the story with that word and see how you hear it.

- **Conversation starters:**

- Some early Jewish and Christian interpreters read this story as a story of resurrection of the dead. But if you really read the passage, it is clear that it’s a story of resurrection of a people. It’s restoration to wholeness. It is communal, not individual. And it is specifically about the restoration of the people of Israel to their homeland. How should we talk about and interpret stories like this in our context?
- Read verses 11-14. When have you felt the way the people feel here, all hope lost and completely cut off? What does this exile story have to say to you? How do we read this differently than we would have before a global pandemic?

Microsong: "God's Breath is Hope" (Listen: https://youtu.be/JkH_D7GnoO0)

I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel; God's breath is hope when hope is gone.

Sing the big song: (Listen: <https://youtu.be/bJROcyVnSqQ>)

This is the story of how it all began. God made matter, and chaos shattered.

Eve and Adam, they tried to hide. The world got violent and God replied with a mark and flood
and a rainbow sign, God's love written on skin and sky,

And then God called a family to be a blessing to the earth, ohhh ohhhh

A mother and her favorite son wrestle for the blessing, another son becomes a slave, the land is
saved from famine.

God's family grows. Egypt oppresses. They groan to God and God sends Moses. *Ten strange
signs say "Please release them!" By the sea God saves them.* Ohh ohhh.

The people complain and God rains bread. Daily food and ten new rules.

Five sisters come and ask for land. God says "Yes, amend the law!"

*Moses says, "In your new life across the Jordan, love God with your whole heart and with all your
being, and your strength, now listen: God is One, only God. God is One, only God!"*

Cross over Jordan, stories and stones. Circuits and shouts and the walls come down.

God sends judges like Deborah and the land has rest.

Ruth's worth more than seven sons; Redeem the lost with steadfast love.

Corruption in the temple, then God sends Samuel.

God gives them a prophet, They ask for a king

Does God need a temple? A wise king forgets

And when a bully rules the land, a nation tears apart and loses David's heart...

Through a widow's gift and a prophet's cry. God brings life in desperate times.

Josiah reads a misplaced scroll. He turns to God wholeheartedly like David did.

God gives Jeremiah a picture of God's ruined family...

Is there any hope left, is there any hope left, is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

Any hope? Any hope left? Is there any hope left for you, Jerusalem?

By the streams of Babylon, how can we sing when you are gone, Jerusalem... Jerusalem?

I'm in a valley of human bones. These bones are Israel; God's breath is hope.

God loves every one of us, it's true, and God loves the universe.

Go do your household project!