

Sing:

*Dem bones, dem bones, Dem dry bones,
dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
O hear the word of the Lord*

Did you know there is a new show on TV called *Bones*? And for those of you who have been around for a while and have heard me preach at least a few times you might even be able to guess who the new co-star is Angel! That's right David Boreanaz. He's a very different character on this show. He plays FBI Agent, Seeley Booth and his co-star Dr. Brennan is an anthropologist – thus the nick name Bones.

I often find myself fascinated with these forensic science shows. Maybe it's in my genes, my dad being a detective and all. But I love how evidence can tell a story. I love how one thing can make a life unfold. Everybody is searching for the answers to the problem and then one little thing answers everything.

Bones – examines bones. She can tell in a second more about a person's life and death than we probably could sitting with someone for an afternoon. The bones tell her a person's age, gender, culture, and race. Their bones speak of nutrition, injuries, diseases, births, in a woman's case, and of course, how they died. Our bones carry the story of our lives and while our muscles, our blood and our brains will melt away, in the end, the bones still tell the story.

“There are three parts to human beings” she tells Agent Booth, “First we all have a physical body. Our physical body has parts, works and moves. Second, we all have a brain. We have smarts and intelligence. Third, we have emotions, feelings, and passions. But in the end all that is left are the bones.” “Four”, says Agent Bones, “we have four parts.” “Four?” “Yes, we all have a spirit.”

*Dem bones, dem bones, Dem dry bones,
dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones
O hear the word of the Lord
The toe bone's connected to the foot bone
The foot bone's connected to the ankle bone*

*The ankle bone's connected to the shin bone
O hear the word of the Lord*

How many of you used to sing this song? Do you know the story behind it?

The year was 587 BCE, before the Christian Era. Historically, we might call it the rock bottom of the Old Testament and Israel's history. Their nation had become like a desert floor covered with skeletons. It was worse than World War I, more like the Civil War and the battle of Gettysburg. Dead bodies in the field by the thousands. As far as the eye could see for 360 degrees, the bones of dead young men lying across the desert floor. It was the worst time in their nation's history. The Babylonians had wiped out the entire Israelite army. There was no contest. In 587 BCE, all the young Israelite warriors were killed. Their bodies were sprawled out across the desert sands baking in the desert sun.

The temple - destroyed
The capital city - destroyed
The people were in total poverty
Everybody was hungry and starving

And the Israelite people who did survive were taken as prisoners, chains around their necks, and dragged back to Babylonia. The Jewish nation lay in ruin, a pile of dry bones, telling only a story of destruction. "Where is God? "We shall rot and die", they cried. "We shall be nothing but bones"

So one day the Spirit of the Lord grabbed hold of his prophet Ezekiel and took him to the valley of dry bones. The Lord asked Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Looking around at all those skeletons, Ezekiel wasn't sure what to say. So he used the no-fault answer – "Ah, Lord, you know the answer to this one." "Prophecy to these bones," commanded the Lord, "say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

How foolish this man must have looked. Standing in the middle of a pile of dead bones telling them not to give up hope. It certainly would have been much easier if the bones had already started jiggling and clanking around when God asked Ezekiel to do his preaching. Believe me it is much easier to preach to a congregation that has even a little sign of life than no life at all. But God calls us to believe without seeing. That is because God's words always leave room for hope.

And it is hope that brings us back to life and helps us to believe in the future in spite of what is.

I remember when I first came to Second Church, Gladies was like Ezekiel. Gladies would stand up in church on Sunday morning and say – “where is everybody? Why aren’t people coming to church?”

And sometimes Stefan acts like Ezekiel too when he goes around telling everyone he meets “Go to church!!! Go to church!”

What both Gladies and Stefan are really saying is, “Can these bones live?” And that is the question lots of us are asking. Not just here in Second Church, but in all the Protestant Churches. Can these bones live? Why? Because our mainline Protestant churches are dying.

Sad but true. Recent research from the University of Chicago showed that between 1972 and 1993 Protestantism remained fairly stable at about 63%. However by 2002 the number had dropped to 52%. That is approximately a drop of 10% in 10 years.

In 1960 mainline church members made up 14.4% of the American population, in 2000 church members comprised only 7.4%. Church membership dropped almost 50% in 40 years. I am sure right about now we all want to stand and shout, “Can these bones live!?”

We feel it in all our committees
We feel it when we look at our budget
We feel it when we look around at the empty pews.
We feel it when we read the newspapers and look at our world.

Our tendency, when we hear these reports, is to blame someone – you know those parents who are too busy, or sports played on Sundays. We want to blame the economy, people’s attitudes, the love of money and the loss of Blue laws, we want to ramp up and create all kinds of new programs that we think will entice people to come back to church. We want to do something! It’s scary and agitating to stand in a desert of dry bones.

And do something we should. And that is exactly what Church Council has been discussing. That times are changing and we need to find a different way to do church in today’s world. What we did 50 years ago no longer works today. It is a different world. And if we are committed to our love of Jesus and to his mandate to make disciples, finding new ways is what we have to be about.

We have to be open to the spirit of God blowing through our doors and raising the bones of this church and every other Christian church across the nation.

And more, we have to open to what that might look like.

So how do we do that?

According to Ezekiel and Reese, we must become prayer warriors. We must pray for the breath of God, for the Spirit of God, to come inside us. And if we do, it will. The spirit of God will enter our minds and affect the way we think.

The Spirit of God will come into our emotions and affect the way we feel about ourselves and others. The Spirit of God will enter into our physical bodies and affect our actions guiding our steps along the way.

It's all about the Spirit of God. It is not something we do. In fact we have to resist doing something. Rather, as Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism said, it is a passive thing. It is not trying harder. It is just the opposite. It is where we step back. Take a deep breath, slow down, and ask the Spirit of God to come into our spirits and lead us.

The very essence of God is to take that which is dead and make it live again

So the answer to God's original question to Ezekiel is really quite simple
Mortal can these bones live? Yes, if they're filled with the Spirit of God.
The very same is true for us today. Yes, the church can live when we give ourselves over the power of God.

That's why God gives life to the bones, so they will know that God is God.
That's why God brings the people out of Israel to their homeland, so that will know that God can act. That's why God gives a child to senior citizens Abraham and Sarah, so they will know that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord.
That's why God gives a son to a virgin named Mary, so that she will know that nothing is impossible for God.

That's why God fills us with the life-giving Spirit, so that we will know that God is alive and well and active –right here, and right now. At the heart of the passage from Ezekiel is the message, "God is able"

When we are lost, God is able to find us.

When we are crushed God is able to restore us.

When we are without vision, God is able to give us sight.
When we're overwhelmed, God is able to calm us.
When we're feeling disconnected, alone and discouraged,
God is able to reconnect us, refresh us and revive us.
God can take death itself and transform it into life.
God is able.

That is the message people need to hear.

Where do we need the Spirit of God to be at work among us?
What will life look like after we open ourselves to the power of the Spirit?
Where's the evidence it will work?

In the year 587 BCE the Lord God looked out across the desert. There were skeletons all around. Nothing but skeletons as far as the eye could see. And God said Ezekiel, "pray for the Breath of God to come." And Ezekiel prayed, "Breath of God, come, come on these dead bones" and all those dead bones started to breathe, and started to move, and pretty soon all of them were wiggling and jiggling and dancing.

Bones can tell our story. But only God can bring our story to life.

So pray my friends. Pray for our church. Pray for the Breath of God

*Dem bones, dem bones, gonna dance around
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna dance around
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna dance around
O hear the word of the Lord!*

Amen

Resources: 1. Homiletics Magazine, Volume 20, Number 2, *Legos and Bones*
2. *Making Skeletons Dance*, Sermons from Seattle, Edward Markquart,
<http://www.sermonsfromseattle.com>
3. The New Interpreters Bible
4. Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*:
Chalice Press, 2007