You are My All in All

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. E. Stanley Ott
Ezekiel 37:1-6

January 25, 2015
Ever felt dry in spirit, parched, empty, exhausted, wiped out, even degraded and debased? That’s where we find the whole nation of ancient Israel at this point in our walk through *The Story*. This is the abridged version of the Bible that is allowing us to trace the history of God’s people and the wonderful ways our Lord has always been present to his people and is present to you and to me this very moment. You can still get your copy of *The Story* in our bookstore and jump into reading Chapter 18 for the coming week. Our story is moving right along. After Solomon died, the kingdom of Israel divided into two kingdoms, with Judah and Jerusalem in the south and Israel in the north. The northern kingdom, Israel, was destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 BC, and we are at the point in the story where Jerusalem and Judah are about to be destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 BC.

On the eve of destruction and the fall of Jerusalem, the prophet Ezekiel warned that the devastation to come was because of the sin of God’s people, but he also offered the hope to be found in the God who loves us. Instead of only speaking those words of hope through Ezekiel, God knew he needed to offer an object lesson, paint a visual picture of the people of God to help them understand his message of hope. ¹The 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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’” ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: ‘I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews [muscles] 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’” (Ezekiel 37:1-6). God doesn’t just see you as what you are but sees you as what you will become as you trust him—a person of beauty, promise and joy.

While it is clear that the reason for the dry bones was the sin of God’s people, in our day people often focus on other reasons for the experience of dry bones and deep weariness. Take a best-selling title on Amazon, the book *Exceptionalism* by Greg McKeown. The sub-title makes its point: *The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*. When a friend told me about this book, at first I thought it's about managing your stuff but, no, it's about managing your life. It’s a very practical guide to living by the
real priorities of your life, saying yes to your essentials and saying no to everything else. The first essential priority of your life may be the God who loves you, the second may be the significant people in your life, and the third the work you have to do, but often the thousand things coming at you take priority and leave you like dry bones.

I once took part in a survey, which asked us to describe the characteristics of what it took to be a successful pastor of a large church. I was quite proud of my description until they circulated to everyone what everyone else had written. John Galloway, the pastor of the 2000-member Fox Chapel Presbyterian Church on the north side of Pittsburgh wrote, "Able to handle all the stuff that comes at you." I called John up. "John, I'm an idiot and you're a genius." Furthermore, I knew that what he wrote was not only the description of a pastor of a large church, but it describes almost everybody today as all of us struggle to handle all the stuff that come at us. Sometimes there's more stuff to handle than any normal person can handle. The result is dry bones. No wonder books like Essentialism do well.

Another illustration of this is another best-selling book, Daring Greatly, by Brené Brown, whose TED talk on the courage to be vulnerable is one of the runaway viral videos of the TED talks on Youtube. Brené speaks to the “never-enough” problem of our day. “Never good enough. Never perfect enough. Never thin enough. Never powerful enough. Never smart enough.”¹ She addresses matters of shame and how to deal with them. Again it is about helping our nation of dry bones.

However, please understand this. The people of the whole house of Israel were dry bones, but their bones weren’t dry because they were too busy or because they never had enough or they couldn’t manage their do-lists. The reason for their dry bones was their sin—the sin of their leaders, the sin of their priests and the sin of the individual people of God themselves. Maybe you are dry today because you are too busy or you never have enough, but The Story suggests looking at other behaviors which can be much more damaging. If you subscribe to HBO (and why do you do that?), watch the shows like “The Game of Thrones” and all it portrays, or read the book Fifty Shades of Gray or engage in socially-acceptable substance-abuse or harbor a deep-seated resentment against a

¹Brené Brown, Daring Greatly, p. 25.
family member or participate in any of the seven deadly sins, you are deluded if you think such practices will leave you a robust, joyful and healthy person, growing in the image of the God who loves you.

So, we read in The Story: God speaking: *I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices* (Ezekiel 7:3). The people of God speaking: *Joy is gone from our hearts; our dancing has turned to mourning. The crown has fallen from our head. Woe to us, for we have sinned!* (Lamentations 5:15-16). Dry, dry, dry bones.

I love the simple song Daniel Jernigan wrote a few years ago to be sung to the person of Jesus: “Taking my sin, my cross, my shame, rising up again I bless your name, you are my all in all. When I fall down you pick me up, when I am dry you fill my cup, you are my all in all.”

When your bones are dry because you’ve mis-stepped in any way, you know you have sinned, you are aware you have behaved in a manner unworthy of our Lord, then seek the Lord who loves you and know his love and forgiveness. When you and I are dry bones, it’s good to remember our Lord loves us, never abandons us, always calls us back.

As a matter of fact, there is something amazingly beautiful about the way the prophets, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, name Israel’s sin and the behaviors that depleted them, degraded them and dried their bones; yet the prophets did not stop by pointing out their sin. They also gave Israel a way to imagine a new future—that God doesn’t just see you as what you are but sees you as what you will be become—a person of beauty, promise and joy as you trust him. *4 Then God said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live* (Ezekiel 37:4-5). God sees you as what you will be.

So the prophets didn’t only focus on the negative and on all of the mistakes and errors people made—which by the way seems our own national and personal pastime. The God who loves you spoke words of hope through the prophets, saying, “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezekiel 36:26). John Powell writes, “Some time ago, a friend told me of vacationing in the Bahamas when he saw a large and restless crowd gathered on a pier. Upon investigation, he
discovered that the object of all the attention was a young man making the last-minute preparations for a solo journey around the world in a homemade boat. Without exception everyone on the pier was vocally pessimistic. All were actively volunteering to tell the ambitious sailor all the things that could possibly go wrong.

“The sun will broil you!” “You won’t have enough food!” “That boat of yours won’t withstand the waves in a storm!” “You’ll never make it!”

“When my friend heard all these discouraging warnings to the adventurous young man, he felt an irresistible desire to offer some optimism and encouragement. As the little craft began drifting away from the pier toward the horizon, my friend went to the end of the pier, waving both arms wildly like semaphores spelling confidence. He kept shouting: “Bon Voyage! You’re really something! We’re with you! We’re proud of you! Good luck, brother!”

John Powell concluded, “Sometimes it seems to me that there are two kinds of people. There are those who feel obligated to tell us all the things that can go wrong as we set out over the uncharted waters of our unique lives. Then there are those who stand at the end of the pier, cheering us on, exuding a contagious confidence: ‘Bon Voyage!’” God doesn’t just see you as what you are but sees you as what you will become as you trust him. The God who loves you wants you to know as dry as your dry bones may be that there is a God-blessed future for you.

During the 1960s, the musical that caught the attention of the nation was “The Man of La Mancha,” the story of a knight by the name of Don Quixote and his sidekick and squire Sancho Panza. Recently, I was talking with a group of people in their thirties and I asked them if they knew the great song “The Impossible Dream” from the Man of La Mancha. I was stunned when only one had heard of it and none of them knew the story. I remember how Robert Schuller used the story to explain that there is something of the story of Don Quixote that shows how our God doesn’t just see you as what you are but sees you as what you will become as you trust him. In the story, people called daft and crazy this knight, Don Quixote, the Man of La Mancha. He did strange things like

tilt at windmills with his lance. So he asked, "Who's crazy? Am I crazy because I can see the world as it could become? Or are you crazy because you see the world as it is? Who's really crazy?"

In one of the early scenes of the stage play, the Man of La Mancha is in a tavern where he sees a peasant girl. Aldonza is her name. She's a waitress by day and a woman of the night by night. She serves the drunken camel drivers. The Man of La Mancha says to this unkempt woman, "My Lady." She looks at him and exclaims, "Lady?" Some camel driver makes a pass at her and she squeals…laughs. The Man of La Mancha says, "Yes, you are My Lady, and I shall give you a new name. I shall call you Dulcinea. You are My Lady…you are My Lady, Dulcinea."

In another scene, they are alone together. She is in distress, not understanding his words and his behavior. She says, "Why do you do and say these things? Why do you treat me the way you do? What do you want from me? I know men. I've seen them all; I've had them all; they're all the same. They all want something from me. Why do you say these things? Why do you call me Dulcinea? Why do you call me your Lady? What do you want from me?" He says, "I just want to call you what you are…you are My Lady, Dulcinea."

Later, there is a horrible scene backstage. You hear screams; she is being violated in the worst way a woman can be violated. She runs onto the stage. Insulted with the ultimate indignity, she is crying and hysterical, dirty and disheveled. Her blouse is torn and her skirt is ripped. The Man of La Mancha sees her and says with deep compassion, "My Lady, Dulcinea, Oh, My Lady, My Lady." She can't stand it and cries, "Don't call me a Lady. Oh God, don't call me a Lady. I'm not any kind of a lady. Can't you see me for what I really am? I was born in a ditch by a mother who left me there unclothed and too hungry to cry. I never blamed her. She left me there hoping I'd have the good sense to die. Don't call me a Lady. I'm only a kitchen maid, reeking with sweat, a person people use and forget. Don't call me your Lady. I'm only Aldonza. I am nothing at all." “Now and

---

forever, you are My Lady Dulcinea,” he cries and she cries back, “Noooo,” as she runs away in the depths of her humiliation.

The curtain drops. The curtain rises, The Man of La Mancha is dying, like our Lord, dying from a broken heart, despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. To his deathbed comes a Spanish queen, a regal woman with a mantilla, a veil of lace. She kneels, makes the sign of the cross, and prays. He opens his eyes and says, "Who are you?" She replies, "My Lord, don't you remember? You spoke to me and everything was different.” “I spoke to you?” “You sang a song, don't you remember? 'To dream the impossible dream, to fight the unbeatable foe, to bear the unbearable sorrow, to run where the brave dare not go.' My Lord, don't you remember? You called me by a new name, you called me Dulcinea." She stands proudly. "I am your Lady." The angels sing. He goes to be with his Father. It is finished and— she is born-again.

In the days of the prophets, the whole nation of Israel was an Aldonza because of what she had done and what was done to her. Yet, the God who loves Israel saw what she would become, her dry bones that would live again. In some aspects of your life and mine, you and I are also an Aldonza, because of what we have done or what has been done to us. The God who loves you doesn’t just see you as what you are but sees you as what you will become as you trust Him – a person of beauty, promise and joy. For Jesus sees his church—you and me—as his Dulcinea, the Bride of Christ, his Lady. “When you fall down he’ll pick you up, when you are dry, he’ll fill your cup, he is our all in all.”