

Originally, I picked this passage from the prophet Ezekiel because it is one of my favorite passages to preach on. I gotta be honest with you...on a basic level, the images in this passage are kind of creepy and disturbing. In fact, that is a good way to describe the entire book of Ezekiel, creepy and disturbing. Ezekiel is well known for his weird imagery of wheels descending from the heavens and valleys full of dry bones. While admitting that the imagery invoked in this passage is creepy, it is still one of my favorite passages to preach on because as creepy as it may seem, it is also full of hope and promise for the Church. I don't know about you, but I could certainly use a prophetic promise of hope and restoration in a time like this, when we are full of anxiety and worry.

For those who may not remember, Ezekiel was a sixth century BCE (before the common era) prophet. He was one of those people who was carried off during the Babylonian Exile, likely because he was part of a priestly family. His people are in exile. Jerusalem, including the Holy Temple, would be destroyed. The whole system of faith and life and culture of the Jewish people had been upturned during this time. Ezekiel was prophesying to a devastated people. And yet, in the midst of all the chaos and turmoil that the Jewish people, including Ezekiel, were experiencing, we get the 37 chapter of Ezekiel. Ezekiel is told by God that God plans on restoring the people of Israel, and Ezekiel has an important role to do in that restoration. Ezekiel is being called to prophesy to the nation of Israel, the valley of dry bones, that God is about to do a new thing for their people. There is hope and there is promise and there is restoration found in God for the people of God.

We are living in uncertain and chaotic times. Every day, our leaders are breaking into our tvs to tell us about the latest sick and death totals. We hear the news about in-fighting between politicians. We hear of churches defying the governments orders to close and then people who attended the worship service are getting sick. We are worried about our loved ones who might be sick with the Corona Virus. Many people have lost their jobs and are now worried about paying bills and getting food in the midst of all this. Grocery shelves are empty. People are fighting at the Dollar General over toilet paper. Once bustling streets in New York City are now empty. The famous smog of Los Angeles has cleared up because people aren't driving as much. Marine animal life is returning to the canals of Venice because people are staying home. I don't know about you, but I find myself sleepier than I normally am during the day. I think it's my body's way of telling me that I'm under a lot stress, just like everyone else. People are just trying to survive day by day. Yes, it can seem like we are looking out into a valley of dry bones and replying to God, "Oh Lord, only you know if there can be new life."

Here's the thing about Ezekiel's passage, though: Ezekiel is not alone, even in the terrifying valley of dry bones. God is not only with Ezekiel in that valley of death, but God is also speaking words of new life and hope to Ezekiel and through Ezekiel to the nation of Israel. We are not alone, people of God. God is reminding us that with God, a valley of dry bones can bear new life and restoration. With the breath of God, we can breathe new life into the valleys of our own lives. First Presbyterian Church of Farmington, there is new life and restoration with God. Feel the breath of God coursing through your veins. We are not alone in the valley that surrounds us. God is gathering us together. God can and is using us to do great things. We are still being the Church of Jesus Christ in Farmington, Illinois, even if we aren't meeting together on Sunday mornings for awhile. We are learning how to worship and fellowship together via the internet. We are calling on our members who don't have internet to make sure that they are doing ok. I've heard of people calling on neighbors who are elderly and checking in on them. People who are isolated because a family member is sick are receiving food deliveries from neighbors and family members across the country. Stores are opening earlier to allow elderly and vulnerable people shop without the hoards of people fighting over the last package of toilet paper. In the midst of all the chaos and worry and stress going on in our lives, God is breathing new life

When is all of this going to be over? When can we go back to the way things used to be before all of this started? I don't know when all of this is going to be over. I do know that things aren't going to be the way they were before all of this started, at least I hope not. Ezekiel prophesies that God is breathing new life and restoration into the nation of Israel, not so they can go back to the way things used to be before the Babylonian exile. Rather, God is calling us to be a people full of new life and new hope and restoration and newness. In the coming weeks or months, when the stay-in-residence order is finally lifted and we are

allowed to worship together again, it is my hope that we spend that time together figuring out new ways of being God's people in Farmington, IL. It is my hope that we hear God's calling to restoration and wholeness and new life and we respond to the breathe of God with new life and new vigor and energy, intelligence, and imagination. No, I don't hope that things go back to the way they used to be before all of this started. I hope and pray for the breath of God to stir us and move us into new life. Amen and amen.