

Is There Life?

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October 29, 2023

It's been 42 years, I think, since I spoke from this pulpit last, except, perhaps, for a charge to someone being ordained. I don't know if it seems that long or not. Some ways it does. And I could take quite a while reminiscing this morning. Perhaps, I could do that and share some things that happened while we were here and how the Lord blessed us together. And after that, I could preach a sermon.

So, my first inclination was to say we would take a break and I would finish about 20 minutes of reminiscing and then do 20-minute sermon but I think perhaps that wouldn't go over too well and there might be a demonstration and a walkout. There might also be a few who would not off a little. Not that you ever do that, but when you had a double whammy, it might happen.

I will remember a man named Sam, not in this church, who usually had a little snooze in the church service. That was okay, but he was in the choir and he tended to snore with his bass voice. Someone asked me about it and thought I should wake him up. And my answer was we tried to provide for as many needs as possible in the church. And if Sam needs a snooze then we're willing to provide us. And first notice I didn't take any responsibility for putting him to sleep in the first place.

But before I deal with the Bible passage this morning, I'm going to reminisce a little. I was told when I accepted a call to come here from Nova Scotia that your Sunday attendance was about 35 people.

Reverend Fred Neil was your interim moderator. He told me there were challenges to be faced. You see, there were still some lingering feelings connected with the amalgamation of Knox Church and First Church. And do remember people saying, oh, they're Knox people. The amalgamations still had its hold on some and created a degree of tension or even division in the church family and that needed to be overcome but thankfully, God blessed our ministry together. Your faithful support, your membership rallied, and new people came along to join the church family.

Someone from another church in town questioned me once, where are you finding those new people? One which I can reveal now was the town office and the deputy clerk named Bob. Once a month he would slip me a list of all the new water hookups in the town. Now that of course was not quite the thing to do, but it meant I could be the first clergyman to visit those folk. And you know they never forgot that.

We were blessed with the youth groups, the explorers, boys brigade, men's breakfast, an annual weekend camp for the congregation, Bible studies, active women's groups. I think three hand bell choirs for a while were formed and so it went and the busy life continued.

There's one story from our youth group activities I like to repeat. Each fall, if you were around at that time, and you have to be a certain age to have been, we prepared a takeout meal and delivered it to people's homes. It was a potato salad and usually ham meal and included pies that the ladies of the congregation provided. One year we decided to have turkey rather than ham as the cold meat. We were delighted when someone from the congregation, Murray Mitchell, said he would gladly donate however many turkeys we needed. And we accepted that because the price was right, you know. He neglected to tell us they would be live turkeys. And so, can you imagine the youth group going out to the farm, wrestling those twenty-pound birds, and preparing them. They did it and never did find anywhere in the courses leading to ordination as a minister where there were instructions on eviscerating turkeys. Whenever the meals had been delivered and we cleaned up the kitchen, nobody wanted to have a meal that included turkey. We had pizza.

God blessed us together in so many ways during those seven years. And not long before she was called home, we visited Muriel Sheldon. She was then over 90 years of age. And she talked about those years and she said, "I call them the golden years."

We continue to thank God for the years we are able to share with you people, well, some of you people now in this church. And we never lost our interest or concern for you over the years. We're saddened of course when we realize that so many of the leaders and elders who were active at that time have been called to their eternal home.

But just one comment. Can you imagine when we lined up our speakers for the men's breakfast that one person we invited was Lloyd Robertson? And he came and spoke to our men's breakfast. We aimed high and were rewarded when he agreed to come. Just imagine that! Someone of his stature!

So I'm going to resist the temptation to spend all my time remembering. But I do, however, want to share something with you that I have observed over the last several years. There are some things I believe should be said and should be given our attention. Anniversaries are times to look back, but certainly also to think ahead.

Here's an example of what has troubled me in the Presbyterian Church over the past while. You may know we live in the city of Brantford. We have for over 20 years since retirement. It's a growing city with about 100,000 people now. When we there in 2000, there were four Presbyterian ministers serving in the congregations. All four were full time. All but one of those churches had a Sunday school. Can you believe that there were always children in the Sunday Presbyterian congregations? Today, there's no Sunday school in any of those churches. That's understandable because you don't expect seventy-year-old couples to be having children. Today, it's also sadly true. There's not a Presbyterian minister serving in the city of Brantford today, not even half-time. One, city congregation closed and amalgamated with the country congregation. That building was sold. There was an attempt to join two of the congregations a few years ago but it failed. And just lately, a second Presbyterian Church building has been sold and will become an apartment building. The congregation says it will continue and will now rent space somewhere. And of course we'll continue using the proceeds from the sale. Added to that, the largest congregation of the presbytery of Paris, has just been given permission to leave the Presbyterian Church, and it has had a reported attendance on Sunday of 400. What has happened in Brantford is but a reflection, I'm sorry to say, about what's happening across Canada.

So, you may be surprised that I've chosen to talk about a vision that the prophet Ezekiel was given in the Old Testament those many centuries ago. It's my prayer that what Ezekiel experienced will challenge us and give us faith to believe that things will change in the years ahead. Let's believe that what God showed Ezekiel, he also wants us to see.

Ezekiel had a very challenging life. He lived in a day when very few people paid attention to God. Most of his congregation, the people of Israel, had wandered away from God and were worshiping idols. Then as often happened, they turned against God and his prophets. They didn't want to hear what Ezekiel had to say. And we can understand that God's prophet would have many days when he just wanted to give up and do something else. You'd probably hear him say, "I might as well save my breath. All the people want to hear is a prophet who approves of whatever they're doing. They won't listen to what God demands." So, he sought an answer to the situation. Fewer and fewer people believing in God, fewer and fewer, would give him the time of day.

Now, God was well aware that his prophet was in that situation. After all, what could one small voice of a hated prophet accomplish? So, you heard what happened in the scripture reading. Ezekiel was given a vision. He was taken in his mind to a place outside the city. A place in the countryside where there were rolling hills and deep valleys. But the scene was far from scenic. It was disturbing. You heard how the hills were covered with thousands upon thousands of skeletons. And these were skeletons that were not just dry. We were told they were really dry. So they been there for a long time. It was not a place you would go for a hike or a picnic or a sightseeing.

If we saw a valley like that, we would be deeply moved, I'm sure. And a wave of sadness would come over us. Besides being spooky, it would be terribly sad. You would not want to spend very long there, even if it was Halloween. You could describe it as the valley of the dead or a lonesome lifeless valley.

Then God asked Ezekiel a question, "What do you think Ezekiel? Do you believe there's any chance those bones can live?" The prophet could only give a nervous laugh and reply, "Of course not. By no stretch of the imagination could there be any life found there. It's a terrible, spooky place. When you're dead, you're dead." He could say that someone would be out of his mind to say there was a chance that those bones would live. It's a huge cemetery.

I think Ezekiel was somewhat of a Presbyterian for he answered very carefully, "I don't know, Lord." He shrugged his shoulders and added "only you can answer that." It was sort of God only knows. Why would God give him such a vision? Was the prophet not sad enough already? We believe it was because this servant of the Lord needed to be given hope. He needed to hear something positive about the future A valley full of bones would not encourage him, let alone bring him hope. He couldn't imagine those bones being revived. It was impossible. But then God says, "Ezekiel, speak to those bones." What in the world would that accomplish?

Now, clergy are used to speaking at all sorts of gatherings or occasions. In fact, some clergy are ready to preach or speak no matter what the occasion. At the drop of a hat, they can go on forever, or what seems like forever. You've heard them, haven't you? They may have nothing to say but they insist on saying it anyhow at weddings, funerals, dedications, any such occasions. A Presbyterian college professor advised his students, who were preparing for the ministry that we were to be ready to preach, pray, or die at a moment's notice.

Just a simple example I don't know how many times I've been at a gathering and who's asked to say grace? Once upon a time when I was asked to say grace, I gave into a temptation. People bowed their heads and I said, "Grace."

I had a clergyman tell me with laughter about a request he received A place where he ministered had been chosen by the local authorities as an area where a water supply would be stored. So, they build a big dam and when the construction was finished, there was going to be a huge celebration and guess what? The Reverend John was asked if he would offer a prayer when the dam site was open. He said he hardly knew what to say and what to pray when asked to bless a dam.

Well, return to the scene in that valley and to Ezekiel, God says, "I want you to talk to those dry bones." He had never prepared a message for that before. In fact, though, he was given the message, tell those dry bones, the Lord God is going to raise you up from the dead and make you a great nation again. Think you'd be ready to say that? These dry bones will have flesh on them again and these bodies will be filled with fresh air and they'll rise up as a strong and mighty arm a miracle. Can you imagine what Ezekiel thought? Out there in the desert valley with nothing to see but dry bones covering the ground and he's supposed to preach to them. He might very well think, "Lots of people say I lost my mind and preaching to dry bones will confirm it," But amazingly Ezekiel did as the Lord commanded and here's what we're told. There was a rattling sound, and bones came together bone to bone. Tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them. God breathed into them and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast, healthy multitude.

Amazing! What a vision! There had been so much that would make the prophet depressed and ready to throw in the towel. Now his heart beats so hard he was afraid it might burst. No one else saw any chance of life in the nation. No one else thought that things would ever be like they used to be. But this is what God wanted his prophet to believe. A revival nobody else thought they would ever have the good old days again. This is what God wanted the people of Israel to hear.

I must confess I have been very troubled about our church as a whole and where we have gone over the past 10 to 15 years. We excuse ourselves and say, "Oh well, it's the same in all the other churches." Surely true, and there are numerable reminders around serving as reminders to us of what used to be. I really believe we've been living in a period of denial, however, difficult to face the facts. So, we don't talk about it. I feel our church in Canada is in trouble. It is largely under the valley and has seemingly lost its way. Maybe we in many places have become more like cemeteries than places of celebration. Our message

becomes diluted. We spend most of our time talking about other issues, issues no doubt important, but we sometimes forget and depart from the central core of what the church is all about.

We spend so much time talking about what things should be changed. And the church must be ready to accept those changes. And we are advised that we need to stop telling people is anything unique or different about what we believe. And so we have largely ceased talking about the all important message. Society will not change until people have been changed. You see, there's no way around what Jesus said. *I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me.* We are now advised to say that the verse doesn't mean what we thought it meant. That the verse means we hate others if we use it. We're taught never to say that our faith is the truth.

The Old Testament prophets and Jesus himself were not afraid to point out where people were going astray. Note the battles Jesus had. They were with the religious people who had placed the law at such a peak that it was all important rather than the inner trust and faith. It's not surprising where the greatest opposition Jesus encountered came from. It came from those who were religious leaders more concerned about what the law demanded and more concerned about their positions of authority over the people than about what God wanted. When Jesus sparred with the religious people who disagreed with him and pointed out where they were wrong, it didn't mean he hated them.

In our day there are certain things you cannot say or you are immediatly in trouble. You won't be able to run for elected office. You won't be allowed to speak in our universities. And they will say it's because you're teaching hate. And the church, we keep quiet, and watch ever so carefully that we do not offend or upset anybody. We have to admit we're just one among many religions in the world now. And would never suggest to someone that what we believe is the truth, and they may be in error. In the meantime, the valley receives some more dead bones.

What should we think about then when it's a milestone being observed?. Now we admit the humans will not bring the church back to life. It has to be by the breath of God as it was in Ezekiel's vision. And I close with a haunting question that I often bring to mind. For Jesus asked one day, when the son of man returns, will he find faith on the earth? And we can add, will he find the Presbyterian Church on Earth? After the vision in the valley, the Lord promised Ezekiel some amazing things. He said, "I will restore you. I will put my spirit in you and you will live. You will possess the land you once had. You will experience new life." May these be the words we treasure and hold dear. Things will change. We believe things will get better for the church and for God's people.

I conclude with a few questions Can we believe that there can be life even in skeletons? But you're only reminders of what used to be. And perhaps like the prophet, we have to respond, "Only you know, Lord." And contemplating the years ahead, may we believe that only God can provide the breath and the life the church will need to survive. You think we can listen in faith and hear the rattling starting already?

Thanks be to God.