

Excerpts from Ezekiel 37 & Acts 2
“From Bones to Balloons”

June 4, 2017
Rev. David Pierce

In 1972, the Rolling Stones released an album titled *Exile on Main Street*. At the time the album was described by one critic as “Weary and complicated, barely afloat in its own drudgery, it rocks with extra power and concentration as a result. It is more indecipherable than ever. A pile of old themes—sex as power, sex as love, sex as pleasure, distance, craziness, release—on top of an obsession with time that was more than appropriate in men pushing 30 who were still committed to what was once considered youth music.”¹

If you forget for the moment that we’re talking about a rock and roll band, this critic could be describing any one of us on any day of the week. Weary and complicated, barely afloat in its own drudgery. Sounds like a Monday morning to me. Of course, we’re talking about something far more significant than just trying to wipe the sleep from our eyes as we make our way to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee. I can’t speak for you, but most mornings I can at least find something good and healthy to eat in my cupboards, as I help my children get safely off to school and I drive to a job I love in a car I love, maybe stopping along the way to buy myself a second cup of coffee, because I can afford to do that using just the spare change lying on the floor under my feet. If I’m being honest about it, weary and complicated—thankfully—don’t even begin to describe my life. In this way, they probably don’t do much to describe the life of Mick Jagger either. Because what we’re talking about is what it’s like to live in exile. Mr. Webster defines exile as “the state or a period of forced or voluntary absence from one’s country or home.” Exile. Displacement. Isolation. Not knowing when, if ever, the weariness and complication of life is going to end. Exile.

Whether we have ever lived in exile ourselves, we can’t say that we don’t know something about it. For one thing, we have the story of Ezekiel before us. He is in exile, living in a valley of dry bones. They are the bones of the people of Judah. Once upon a time Judah was hailed as a people belonging to God. But now they belong to Babylon. After 135 years of resisting a foreign power, Judah was taken captive and sent into exile. She now lives on the edge of town in a valley of washed up dreams. Her bones are dried out. Day

¹ Christgau, Robert (1972), *The Village Voice*.

after day Ezekiel walks among the skeletons. It's an indecipherable reality. Everyone looks the same. He can no longer remember who is who. In exile one loses touch even with their own selves, nearly forgetting that we are more than our present surroundings and sufferings. As the Rolling Stones put it in one of their songs, exile can be hypnotic, mesmerizing, the sunshine can bore the daylights out of you. "Kick me like you've kicked me before. I can't feel the pain no more."²

There is a reason, I suppose, for why they dubbed their album, *Exile on Main Street*. Because exile doesn't always require that we be sent away to live someplace else. One can experience exile right at home, right on Main Street. Did you know that of the 65.3 million refugees in the world today, 40.8 million of them are internally displaced.³ That means they are still living in their own country. They just aren't living in their own home. That home—their home—is likely in ruins. It's happening in Syria, in South Sudan, it happened in Kabul, Afghanistan just a few days ago when a bomb, the mark of war, destroyed a whole neighborhood of homes. People waking up to get a cup of coffee; children on their way to school; men and women on their way to work; many now dead. The survivors now exiled. And what are they going to do? What in the world are they going to do? They can't work. They have no places of business. They went up in ashes, too. There is no money. No stores. No gardens. No food. Walk your way to the border? Those are closed, too.

About 6 years ago I visited a refugee camp in Palestine where I met teenagers, 13, 14 years old, whose homes had been destroyed or taken by the Israeli government following the Second Intifada in 2005. Intifada is an Arabic word meaning "uprising." It describes what has happened twice since 1967 when Israel won a war over their Palestinian neighbors. Following that war, and ever since that time, Israel has been taking land that under international law belongs to the Palestinians. When I met the teenagers in the refugee camp they told me that they were living in the only home they'd ever known, behind an 18-foot high, 450-mile long concrete wall that the state of Israel has built to make it clear who belongs where.

² From Track 1, *Rocks Off*.

³ From the United Nations Refugee Statistics Bureau

Now I've heard it said, well, Israel won the war. To the victor goes the spoils. The land belongs to Israel. It's only right. And besides, isn't it biblical? And I've heard it said, well, those Palestinians. They're jihadists and terrorists. They're dangerous. We need to have a wall up in order to protect ourselves from them. And maybe there is some truth to that. But I'll tell you, we better be careful, because before long, the people who are living on the other side of the walls we build are going to be saying the same thing about us that we're saying about them. "Well, they must be dangerous." I've been to the other side of that wall, though, and I can tell you, the people living there are not dangerous. And as for what is biblical, does God not also say in the Bible, "If you would call yourselves my people, you must be a home for the widows and orphans."

I am absolutely convinced that no place on earth will know peace until those who are powerful and mighty open their hearts to the weak and vulnerable, until the exiled are allowed to go home again. I am also convinced that at our most basic, human level, we can all confess that we have been exiled at one time or another. That we have felt the sharp pain of being pushed aside and shut out. If so, then you know there comes a critical moment in exile when you have to decide whether you're just going to survive or whether you're going to live again. This is the question Ezekiel is facing in the valley of dry bones. "Can these bones live?" This is not the same as asking if they're just going to make it.

Some of you know that when Moira and I moved back to New England 3 years ago from Pennsylvania, we came back in large part because we wanted to live closer to Moira's dad, Dave. Almost 4 years ago Dave was involved in a freakish motorcycle accident where he suddenly lost consciousness while driving on an exit ramp. Alone on the road and going only about 30 miles per hour, he tipped off his bike and crashed into a guardrail. The nature of the impact was such that he broke all his ribs, shattered his right leg from top to bottom, punctured both his lungs, and ultimately had to have both his arms amputated just below the shoulders. As you can well imagine, there was a period of time, about 2 months, when the only question anyone seemed to ask was, "Will he make it?" Who could really say? To this day, the doctors have never been able to say what caused the accident. In the ICU he had machines to help him breathe, machines to feed him, machines to hold his broken neck in place. Honestly, it didn't look like he was going to make it. Then one day, as suddenly as he blacked out, he woke up. This was followed by months of psychological

therapy, followed by more months of physical therapy, followed by news that he would be able to get a knee replacement and walk again, and two prosthetic arms, and finally, he could go home again. Naturally, for Dave and for his family there so much relief and gratitude for just having survived that no one thought to ask, “Yes, but can he also live?” Because the only thing harder than living in exile may be coming out of exile.

You remember the story of the Hebrew slaves living in Egypt. All day long their backs are getting bloodied and beaten by their taskmasters until finally God comes to Moses to say, “That’s not where my people belong. I’m sending you to bring them out of their bondage.” So, after a series of showdowns and power struggles between Moses and Pharaoh, the Hebrew slaves are set free from Egypt. No more will they have to beg for food and water. No more will they have to ask to sit down, to stand up, to say yes sir, no sir. They will, however, have to travel, to go find a new home, to look around and not lose hope that something will appear, and that’s not an easy thing to do. Starting over takes endurance, persistence. You can’t get down every time you realize things aren’t going to be the way they used to be. Which is what the Hebrews do. Out on the trail, not more than a day or two from Egypt, they start to complain. “There’s no water out here. No shade. We should go back to Egypt.”

“Can these bones live again?” As the Hebrew slaves came to know, as Ezekiel came to know, as my father-in-law has come to know, there’s just no good way to know. When you return home—happy to have made it—only to discover that home isn’t what it used to be, and you’re not either. You can’t feed yourself. You can’t turn the water on, let alone bathe yourself. You can’t sit in your favorite chair. You can’t open the door to go outside. You feel lost in your own home. You’re not in bondage but you’re not free. Maybe we should go back to Egypt. Maybe it would have been better if I’d just died.

“Can these bones live?” Fortunately for all of us, there is one who does have an answer to this question. “O Lord God,” says Ezekiel, “you know.”

“Can these bones live?” It turns out that if we want an answer to this question, all we need to do is look to God and to what God is doing in the church today. On this day of Pentecost God is throwing a party, complete with red balloons, a big table, and a happy birthday banner, because today we celebrate that we are still alive. On the guest list is everyone who has ever been an exile—you, me, my father-in-law Dave, Ezekiel, those two

teenagers I met in the refugee camp in Palestine, Israelis, Syrians, the people whose lives were shattered on London Bridge just last night, and even the 3 crazy guys who did the evil deed. We're all invited to this party, and I hope you'll come because God is giving out a great party favor. Today God is sending you home with God's own Holy Spirit. That's right. It's the same Spirit who long ago called forth light from darkness, the same Spirit who causes rain to fall and flowers to grow, the same Spirit who once made a blind man see and a crippled man to walk, the same Spirit who looks over us—dry and weary as we are—and says only, "Yes, I can make these live again." Amen.