

*Old Book, Fresh Wisdom: Why the Bible is Worth Reading (again)*  
*Can These Dry Bones Live Again?*  
Ezekiel 37:1-10

It's a funny thing, this knowing that I have only ten more months with you. Suddenly this leisurely conversation that has a new episode every Sunday morning seems more urgent to me. I want you to know everything I know about this path of faith we are walking on together. I feel like a mom sending her first-born off to college a little worried I never really taught you how to do laundry. There are things I need to remember to tell you.

This series we're just beginning today is one of those things. Ironically, it's about the Bible. I say 'ironically', because I'm really not one of those people who carries a dog-eared, heavily-highlighted Bible with me everywhere I go. Not too long after I arrived here, I told Carol that I prefer that a big Bible not be the centerpiece of our altar every Sunday morning, because we don't worship the Bible.

And yet, over the years I've been preaching, the Bible has become the most regular inspirer of my spiritual life. It's the thing that makes me want to commit again to being Christian, every time it feels to me like that contract comes up for renewal. Here's why: I think Christianity has the best story. It's the story of a God who is an artist, who created the earth and humans and loved that creation so thoroughly that she would go to any length to nudge us toward more life and love and flourishing, friendship with each other and with God himself.

Deciding to follow any religious tradition is a decision to attach yourself to a particular story, a particular way of looking at the world. Believing that *this* story will hold things together, hold *you* together, in days like these, when there's a lot that's falling apart. I believe there are many ways of knowing truth, lots of paths that might take us to God. What we're doing when we choose one religion or tradition over the others is to say 'This is the story that helps me make sense of my life. This is the story I want *my* story to live inside.'

The more I know about this story, the more it draws me. I think it might do the same for you. But it's hard to get a sense of the whole story, the big picture of the Judeo-Christian God, from the little bits of Scripture text you hear in church, even if you're here every week, even if you're paying close attention.

The truth is: the Bible is a confusing book. Sometimes it can feel like you're holding on to faith in *spite* of what's written in here, not *because* of it. There are whole chapters of it that are not sweet, or attractive. It's got things in it we'd rather distance ourselves from than own. If you're looking for clear instructions on how to live, it's much easier to get them from a TED talk or a YouTube video.

This is what we're going to talk about for the next few weeks. We're going to tell the truth about how hard it is to read the Bible, acknowledge that it's complicated to think about how this might be *your* story. I'll be tracking a book published in the last couple of years, called *How the Bible*

*Actually Works*, written by a smart, entertaining college professor named Peter Enns. But this is really should be a conversation. I hope you'll join it in one of the small groups we're forming next month. But in the meantime, I hope you'll hear in these sermons an invitation to think about the Bible in a different way than you have before.

Here's where Pete Enns starts: He calls the Bible an *ancient, ambiguous and diverse* book. *Ancient*: the words were written down thousands of years ago. If you approach the Bible like it's a recipe for a good life, you'll figure out pretty quickly that it calls for ingredients that are no longer available. It uses an unfamiliar measuring system. The Bible is embedded in a culture that is entirely foreign to us. Which is to say, if you read a story from the Bible—either Old Testament or New—and think 'That's weird', it's OK to say that out loud. That's not a problem with the translation or with you; it's that you're reading something that was not written for you.

The Bible is *diverse*: it's made up of different writings, by different authors, written at different times. It's got contradictions and conflicting perspectives in it all the way through. That's not an accident; that's by design. Think about it: the New Testament includes four Gospels: four different points of view on who Jesus was, what he did, what someone remembered him saying, decades after he died. Who would do that if they were writing a book that was supposed to have a single authoritative, commanding voice?

It's *ambiguous*: the Bible was never supposed to be an instruction manual from God. When it fails to give us rock-hard certainty for our faith, or clear answers to questions that come up about how to live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that's because our expectations don't match the design of this book. The Bible was never meant to be downloaded and indexed, or used like a textbook with the answers in the back.

What it is meant to be is an invitation to explore a way of life that is self-reflective and curious, embracing of mystery, open to imagination. What the Bible gives us is a sometimes-puzzling set of road markers. It's a path that isn't directed by rules and answers, but by wisdom.

Wisdom is very different than a set of rules. Wisdom can only be learned as you experience what happens to you in your own life; you reach it by trial and error. It's always growing, never finished; wisdom is trusting that what we don't know yet is as safe as what we do know. Wisdom is what you need when you hit a moment in your life that is unscripted, when what you do next reveals something about who you are. The character that has silently formed inside of you—qualities like integrity, humility, truthfulness, self-control, patience. The commitments you have taken on—to family and friendship, justice, work ethic. All those things live not in a book but inside of us; they kick in when we are trying to make order out of the chaos of our lives.

Living well through those moments doesn't require a rule-book or a recipe; it needs something that lives inside of you so you can grab it readily. Wisdom for *your* living, a way to work out *your* life as it unfolds in front of you. That's what this book offers: stories that shape the ways you will think and feel and extend yourself toward others when there are no easy answers.

I'm inviting you to do for yourself the fascinating work I get to do every week as I write a sermon. To take an ancient, foreign, kind of weird story and see if it holds wisdom when we stand it up next to what is going on in our lives right now. Let's try it.

This week I need some wisdom for how to think about what's happening in Afghanistan. What is my country's responsibility? What is *my* compassionate duty, or ours collectively—in action, or at least in the way we think and feel about this tragic, awful situation on the opposite side of the world?

When I think about what God might say about this, I turn first—always—to the stories I know. That's why we study the Bible: only the stories we know by heart are there when we need them. As I think about Afghanistan, I remember the stories I've heard before: how often in the Hebrew Scriptures God told the Israelites to go out of their way to welcome the alien, the foreigner, women and children they saw as weaker and less capable than themselves. I remember that Jesus said, 'Whenever you offer a cup of water to someone who's thirsty, or friendship to someone who is locked up and un-free, you're doing this same act of kindness toward me, toward God.' Every story I can think of in my mental library of the Bible steers me toward generosity and open-heartedness, a wider compassion than what comes naturally; to take care of not only 'our own' but 'God's own', which is every person alive.

And maybe there's wisdom for us in this story we read today, about Ezekiel who followed God's voice into a valley filled with dry bones of dead human beings and then watched as God breathed life into those bones, made those skeletons into real, alive people who stood up and walked and danced. I want to say to you: Don't stop to wonder whether this actually happened, or why the God who did things like this has vanished from the earth. Look for the wisdom in this story.

- The reminder that even the things that look entirely hopeless to us, completely drained of life, humanity, peace, are not beyond the possibility of rising again.
- Notice that the final step of bringing those bones to life happened not at God's word, but at Ezekiel's; that God needed a human voice to complete the miracle.
- Go back to the beginning of that story and imagine how terrifying it would be to walk into a whole valley filled with human remains. How did they get there? Was it a burial dumping ground? Had those people been massacred and left there by an invading army or a cruel government? Maybe the wisdom I need from this story is courage not to turn away in the face of something that feels overwhelming or frightening. To stay present even when the landscape is awful, because that's how I put myself in the path of new life, make myself available to help bring hope alive again.

To read the Bible like this doesn't require theological education or years of study. It takes imagination and curiosity, holding this book like a partner instead of like a sacred object. I think it might require friends, a community that pursues together the wisdom in here, because those markers are always a little bit obscure, not obvious. That's what church is, what church is supposed to be: a wisdom-seeking community. May it be so for us.