

An Incredible Dream

Ezekiel 37:1-14
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They still tell the story at William and Mary College of college President William Ewell. For over a century, William and Mary had been a leader among American universities. Then came the Civil War. In the hard days of Reconstruction which followed, William and Mary went bankrupt. Soon it had a deserted campus, decaying buildings, and no students. As with so many Southern schools, after that war, it was written off as dead by everyone.

Well, everyone, except its president Ewell. He had given his best years to advancing the liberal arts through that school. He refused to give up. So, every morning, President Ewell went to the deserted campus, climbed the tower of its main building, and rang the bells, calling the school to class. He acted as if the school was still there. People thought he was crazy. But for seven years, every day, President Ewell rang the bells at William and Mary, in defiance of the despair and hopelessness that would destroy everything he held valuable. And eventually, miraculously, it worked. Others began to catch his vision. Students, teachers, and eventually money returned. Today, America's second oldest university thrives again, because of the hope of one crazy, incredible dreamer.

Ezekiel was made from the same stuff as President Ewell. This prophet of God proclaimed that he had seen God in a fiery chariot. He ate scrolls and burned his hair to shock people into paying attention. But there was a method to his madness. For Ezekiel, also, was incredibly, stubbornly hopeful. Ezekiel had two missions in life – the first was, to warn Israel of God's displeasure with their attitude and actions. Ezekiel's second mission was after Israel had suffered God's wrath over their attitudes and actions and sat stewing in exile, to offer the promise that God would save the nation.

In our scripture this morning Ezekiel, in a vision, is led by God to a valley of dry bones, a symbol for Israel in exile. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to these bones, "Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I shall lay sinews upon 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." Sure enough, as Ezekiel spoke, the bones became living people.

The vision of the valley of dry bones was Ezekiel's call to hope. These bones were Israel, broken as a nation, scattered throughout the land of exile, bone dry in soul. Only a God-inspired dream could see them coming together as skeletons, then people, then a nation. It was a crazy, incredible God given dream.

Today we live in an age of reason and rational, realistic thinking, where such daring hope is written off as fantasy and impractical. Christianity is not so much limited by little hope but by little hopes. Petty, no-risk hopes too easily become our stock in trade. We hope it doesn't rain on the church picnic. We hope the air conditioning is working. We hope that Sunday's offering can match Monday's bills. We're taught to be practical and productive - levelheaded achievers. This means setting our sights only on targets we know we can hit.

A man in his middle years was on a Caribbean cruise. On the first day out he noticed an attractive woman about his age who smiled at him in a friendly way as he passed her on deck, which pleased him. That night he managed to get seated at the same table as her for dinner. As the conversation developed, he commented that he had seen her on deck that day and appreciated her friendly smile. When she heard this she smiled and commented, "Well, the reason I smiled was that when I saw you I was immediately struck by your strong resemblance to my third husband." At this he perked up his ears and said, "Oh, how many times have you been married?" She looked down at her plate, and smiled then looked up and said "Twice." She was aiming at a target she knew she could hit.

We should have big dreams. The church of God needs crazy, incredible dreams, God sized dreams, not wishful thinking. So often we promise according to our hopes, and perform according to our fears.

A vision of the future, what we call hope, is the greatest animating force we know. Notice, though, to be realistic, hope must trust in a power greater than the problem it faces. Hope must be grounded in someone or something. That's why Ezekiel was quick to envision God breathing his Spirit into those dry bones bringing them to life. No one else could perform such a miracle. This kind of hope is more than just wishful thinking. It is the absolute confidence the future will be good because the future is God's.

Maybe as we look at our facilities here at Hampton Baptist we see a valley of dry bones. We sigh, and find ourselves in the throes of wishful thinking. We ask, "Can something realistically be done in the face of the challenges we have with our aging facility?" No we can't as long as our hope and dream is grounded in ourselves. This is too big for us, but it isn't too big for God...working in and through us.

The words of Jesus at the top of our worship bulletin were never more appropriate, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." To have high hopes is not to dream the impossible dream. With God, all things are possible. The whole point of the resurrection was God could take the worst possible fate - betrayal, shame,

painful execution - and turn it into victory. In fact, Christian realists are those who do dream, think big, and have faith in what God can do. They've seen the inspiring power of the resurrection, and it lives within them, to get the impossible done. It's those who refuse to dream who are out of touch with reality. As Christians, we believe in a fourth dimension - beyond what we can see and touch is a God invisibly active among us. We shouldn't count God out simply because we can't recognize or understand God.

Church growth guru Lyle Schaller suggests that if we want our churches to grow we will offer people a "note of hope." He writes, Perhaps the most common characteristic of churches that are attracting people is not how well the pastor preaches, the quality of its Sunday school, children, youth, music programs or its location. What attracts people is hope, and how hope is communicated and expressed in everything from sermons, music, programs, classes...everything. That note of hope and optimism about the future that is found in the DNA of everything a church does and is a powerful force that will determine the size of the crowd.

I whole heartedly believe that where there is no faith and hope in the future, there is no power for the present. If we at Hampton Baptist will dream big dreams, incredible God size dreams and pray like it all depends on God but work like it all depended on us we will be amazed by what God will do.

When we place our God size dreams in God's hands, we need to expect the unexpected. For sure God will never forget us, but usually God will surprise us.

- When God first told young Abraham he would be the father of nations, God never mentioned Abraham would have to wait until he was over 100 years old to have his first son.
- When King Solomon prayed to God for wisdom to rule, instead of wealth, a delighted God gave him both.
- When Israel, under the Romans, prayed for a Messiah to save them, no one dreamed he would be born in a stable in Bethlehem and his salvation would extend for eternity.

God will never dismiss our open-hearted hopes, but God seldom will give us exactly what we expect. Usually God's gifts are larger but less recognizable than we ever imagined.

- We hope for a cure for an illness but, instead, uncover untapped reserves of strength, love, and wisdom to deal with the illness.
- We hope for adequate rains and a big harvest to end a famine but, instead, are overwhelmed by donations to help the victims.
- We hope for happiness through a comfortable lifestyle but, instead, find joy in simple living.

- I heard of a couple who was unnerved after they prayed that their daughter find a Christian roommate. A month later she announced she was engaged to be married to a fine Christian young man!

Over 350 years ago a shipload of travelers landed on the northeast coast of America. The first year they established a town site. The next year they elected a town government. The third year the town government planned to build a road five miles westward into the wilderness.

In the fourth year the people tried to impeach their town government because they thought it was a waste of public funds to build a road five miles westward into a wilderness. Who needed to go there anyway?

Here were people who had a dream that allowed them see three thousand miles across an ocean and overcome great hardships to get there. But in just a few years they were not able to see even five miles out of town. They had stopped dreaming. With an incredible dream of what we can become through God, no ocean of difficulty is too great. Without that dream, we cannot move beyond our current circumstances.

May we have faith and hope in our future so we will have power in our present.