

December 24, 2006 God Turns Up in the Most Unexpected Places

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Luke 1:5-14

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Ezekiel 37:1-14, "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3 He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5 Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6 I will lay sinews on 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."

7 So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. 8 I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." 10 I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' 12 Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14 I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.' "

One of the most important themes in the Bible is a theme which is revealed in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, in the birth of John the Baptist, and in the birth of Jesus; it is also a theme that is revealed in and runs through our lives as well. That theme is simply - **God Turns Up in the Most Unexpected Places**. God is found in

what appears to be the most God forsaken of places – among the most unlikely, down and out and apparently hopeless locations, situations, and people.

In Ezekiel 37 the question is asked, *“Can these dry bones live?”* - the dry bones representing the defeated and hopeless people of God who had been conquered by the Babylonians. Can these bones live is a way of saying, is there any hope for us? Hope is one of life's necessities. There is a saying that *“A person can live for three days without food, three minutes without oxygen, but only three seconds without hope.”* One of the worst things you can say to a person is that he or she is “hopeless.” In Charles Dicken’s classic, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge laments to the final Spirit who visits him and reveals his impending, unmourned death, *“Why show me these things if I am past all hope?”*

Ezekiel says the people of Israel had given up all hope. Their cry, *“Our bones are dried up, **our hope is lost**; we are cut off completely,”* is the plaintive lament of a hopeless people. But God promises to bring them back to their own land and to restore to life what was apparently dead and hopeless. How is this possible given their terrible circumstances? The Lord says, *“I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live.”* God’s promise of renewal through the power of the Holy Spirit is a gift to God’s people.

Throughout the Bible God shows up and is present where no one would logically expect God to be present and God’s future emerges in ways we would never anticipate – whether among dejected slaves making bricks in Egypt, among defeated and despondent people like those of Ezekiel’s time or by making a birth announcement to a couple of old people who had never had a child in their lives. This is what God does all the time, listen to Luke 1:5-14

“In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was

terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, *“Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.*

You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”

Zechariah and Elizabeth were good people who faithfully served God and yet the desire of their heart, their dream of having a child had never been realized. Then the Lord sends Gabriel with the news of a son and not just any son but the one who will prepare the way for the Messiah. God works through an old married couple well on in years who had never had a child. That is unexpected. Their dream hadn't been fulfilled for most of their lives, and then at the most unexpected time God acted.

For Joseph, the situation is the opposite. He is a young man, he is not even married yet and he has dreams about what his marriage and life will be like with Mary. In Matthew 1:18-21 we hear these words:

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, Son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus for he will save his people from their sins.”

Like Joseph, our dreams and plans of the future can be changed suddenly and dramatically. Our lives don't always turn out the way we hope or dream. This Christmas season, perhaps some of us find ourselves with dreams that have not been fulfilled, life has not turned out the way we planned or imagined. In relationships within families, friendships, work, or church, we are sometimes hurt, disappointed and confused, as Joseph surely was when Mary announced her unexpected pregnancy. Life is not going to be the way we envisioned it would be. Yet in Joseph's life, there was a larger purpose at work that superseded his idea of what his marriage and family would be like. God was prepared to bring something good out of a situation that seemed heartbreakingly disappointing. In our lives, God also can bring good out of painful situations, and while this doesn't lessen our heartache or heartbreak, it does help us to go forward perhaps with greater compassion, or understanding, or commitment.

In addition to the gospel story of Jesus' birth, many Christmas movies, songs, and programs deal with this theme of dreams that don't work out the way an individual wants and yet something redemptive and even transformational occurs.

The movie, *It's A Wonderful Life*, features Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, a man who never gets to fulfill his dreams of what he wants to do – traveling, seeing the world, building bridges and skyscrapers. Instead his whole life is spent in the one horse town of Bedford Falls trying to run a Building and Loan Company that is always on the brink of bankruptcy. When his incompetent partner, Uncle Billy, loses all the Building and Loan's cash on Christmas Eve, George is faced with scandal and prison. Just as with Zechariah and Joseph it is a visit from an angel that turns George's life around in an unexpected way.

When we look at the people in the Bible their dreams were pretty similar to ours. Isaiah dreamed of peace and an end to war. John the Baptist dreamed of people turning their lives around by turning to God for a fresh start before it was too late. Mary dreamed of God making things right in the world and Joseph was willing to be obedient to God's message revealed in a dream, even if it seemed unexpected and hard to believe.

All these dreams are smaller parts of God's larger dream for the whole world expressed by the angels to the shepherds. God's dream is good news of great joy for all people. A Savior is born who is Christ the Lord. God's dream does not unfold the way we might expect it to if we were running the world, it is revealed unexpectedly. The Savior comes not in overwhelming strength but in the vulnerability of a child. The child comes not to the powerful but to the oppressed. Jesus is born in poor conditions, not surrounded by wealth and prestige. God's message is not good news for people of one nation or race but for all people. God's dream is peace and not war, love and not hate; compassion rather than condemnation.

At Christmas time some of us are excited, happy and full anticipation – for vacations from school or work, the chance to travel or to be with family. For others, the difficult circumstances we are experiencing can cause us to feel hopeless and forsaken by God.

Christmas is about the gift of hope in the midst of our weary, strife-filled world. Christmas is about the hope that life can be different, that God can do things we don't anticipate, that God can break into our lives with good news. Christmas is about gift of forgiveness.

Christmas is about being embraced by and holding onto the hope we have in Christ. It is about the hope that is represented in the baby born to Mary so many years ago who can be born in us today.

A church was preparing for Christmas services and the pastor decided he wanted a banner made for the entryway and had a parishioner call the banner company. The parishioner told the man on the phone the message he wanted and the dimensions needed for the entryway.

The sign came back a few days later: . . . **"Unto Mary Jesus was born, six feet long and two feet wide."**

Jesus wasn't born quite that big, but if he lives in us, he is big enough to give hope and help to us and others.

Erik H. Erikson said,

"Hope is both the earliest and the most indispensable virtue inherent in the state of being alive. If life is to be sustained hope must remain, even where confidence is wounded, trust impaired."

Painful events whether ones that are totally beyond our control or ones that we bring on ourselves, can also be the means by which our relationship with Jesus deepens and grows. We can know hope in the midst of our trials. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word that is most frequently translated as "Hope" is also translated as two other words, "Wait" and "Trust."

Hope is as intermingled with Waiting and Trusting as sugar, salt, and flour are in chocolate chip cookies. You really can't separate them once the cookies are made. Hoping, waiting, and trusting are all ingredients of faith.

"Many things are possible for the person who has hope. Even more is possible for the person who has faith. And still more is possible for the person who knows how to love. But everything is possible for the person who practices all three virtues." Brother Lawrence

At Christmas we both celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus and we rededicate ourselves to allowing Christ to be born and live and grow within us. We are to be the presence of Christ in our world today.

Recently several people have emailed me a message which is a letter from Jesus to his children at Christmas. It says in part: "If you want to celebrate My birth just, GET ALONG AND LOVE ONE ANOTHER. Now, having said that let Me go on.

If you want to give Me a present in remembrance of My birth here is my wish list. Choose something from it.

1. Instead of writing protest letters objecting to the way My birthday is being celebrated, write letters of love and hope to soldiers away from home. They are terribly afraid and lonely. I know, they tell Me all the time.
2. Visit someone in a nursing home. You don't have to know them personally. They just need to know that someone cares about them.
3. Instead of writing George complaining about the wording on the cards his staff sent out this year, why don't you write and tell him that you'll be praying for him and his family this year. Then follow up. It will be nice hearing from you again.
4. Instead of giving your children a lot of gifts you can't afford and they don't need, spend time with them. Tell them the story of My birth and why I came to live with you down here. Hold them in your arms and remind them that I love them.
5. Pick someone that has hurt you in the past and forgive him or her.
6. Did you know that people in your town will attempt to take their own lives this season because they feel so alone and hopeless? Since you don't know who they are, try giving everyone you meet a warm smile; it could make the difference. Also, you might consider supporting the local Hot-Line: they talk with people like that every day.
7. Instead of nit picking about what the retailer in your town calls the holiday, be patient with the people who work there. Give them a warm smile and a kind word. Even if they aren't allowed to wish you a "Merry Christmas" that doesn't keep you from wishing them one. Then stop shopping there on Sunday. If the store didn't make so much money on that day they'd close and let their employees spend the day at home with their families.
8. If you really want to make a difference, support a missionary, especially one who takes My love and Good News to those who have never heard My name. You may already know someone like that.
9. Here's a good one. There are individuals and whole families in your town who not only will have no "Christmas" tree, but neither will they have any presents to give or receive. If you don't know them buy some food and a few gifts and give them to the Marines, the Salvation Army or some other charity that believes in Me and they will make the delivery for you.
10. Finally if you want to make a statement about your belief in and loyalty to Me, then

behave like a Christian. Don't do things in secret that you wouldn't do in My presence. Let people know by your actions that you are one of mine.

P.S. Don't forget; I am God and can take care of Myself. Just love Me and do what I have told you to do. I'll take care of all the rest. Check out the list above and get to work; time is short. I'll help you, but the ball is now in your court. And do have a most blessed Christmas with all those you love and, remember, I LOVE YOU."

Evelyn Underhill wrote in *The Light of the World*, "*The birth of Christ in our souls is for a purpose beyond ourselves: it is because **his manifestation in the world must be through us**. Every Christian is, as it were, part of the dust-laden air which shall radiate the glowing epiphany of God, catch and reflect his golden Light. Ye are the light of the world – but only because you are enkindled, made radiant by the one Light of the world. **And being kindled, we have got to get on with it, be useful**. As Christ said in one of his ironical flashes, "Do not light a candle in order to stick it under the bed!"*

As we go through the fun and stress, joy and grief, celebration and loneliness, of Christmas; my prayer is that God will visit us in unexpected ways through worship, angels, dreams, music, scripture, story and one another.

May God reveal the Lord's dream for us within us this Christmas season.

May we be charged with faith to boldly follow in the way of Jesus.

And may we remember to hold onto hope, a dear friend of mine put it this way,

"I used to think hope was the icing on the cake. I've lived long enough to learn hope is the cake." Remember that as you eat your Christmas dessert!

Blessing: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Romans 15:13