

• “Valley of Hope

17 September 2006

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 (CEV)

“Freedom Writers” (Erin Gruwell/Long Beach H.S. story)

1:00 INTRODUCTION

“Today, we’re presenting the second winner in our “Best of Garden Services”, voted on by you, the congregation. First presented in 2002, we felt it deserved a second look.

A year or so before that first service, I had the opportunity to view a video segment from the ABC Show, *Prime Time*. It was a story about a teacher in Long Beach, California, whose dedication and efforts inspired a group of young people who had totally lost hope in any kind of a future for themselves.

“This morning, we’re going to use that tape as the heart of the message, and part of the reason we decided to do that is because school is starting again. One of the things we know is that teachers have a tremendous influence in our lives. I suspect, if each of us paused a moment and thought back, we could name one or two teachers who had a significant impact on us as persons, and on the path our lives have taken.

“However, teachers aren’t the only ones who have the capacity for helping others find hope and healing for their lives. Each one of us can do that because we have the opportunity to touch and influence others’ lives for good every moment of every day. So, as we share in the story of this young teacher and her students, I would like us all to think about those who have been an influence in our lives, and also, to think about the opportunities we have to touch others.”

:46 NARRATION

“The Bible passage for this morning is one I have never used in preaching before, but it’s one I’ve always liked; it seemed to me to be particularly appropriate for the story we’re about to hear. It’s the prophet Ezekiel, and the story is really talking about the people and nation of Israel. In Ezekiel’s time, it seemed as though the nation was dead, and all was lost. All life had gone out of the people, and all vitality was gone. However, Ezekiel had a vision, and this Bible passage is all about what he saw. It begins this way:

Ezekiel 37: 1-3 a

“Some time later, I felt the Lord’s power take control of me, and God’s Spirit carried me to a valley full of bones. The Lord showed me all around, and everywhere I looked I saw bones that were dried out. God said, “Ezekiel, son of man, can these bones come back to life?”

:30 NARRATION

“The question that God asked Ezekiel in the vision he had is a question many of us face in the course of life: “Can these dried-up bones and dried-up spirits come back to life?” In a very real way, that’s what this group of young people from Long Beach California, wondered, too.”

4:10 VIDEO: part 1 “Freedom Writers”

NARRATION

“In the video, we have begun to see a little glimmer of hope, which is also what we find in our Bible passage. The prophet Ezekiel said:

Ezekiel 37:4-8

“God then told me to say: ‘Dry bones, listen to what the Lord is saying to you. I, the Lord God, will put breath in you, and once again you will live. I will wrap you with muscles and skin and breathe life into you. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”

“I did what the Lord said, but before I finished speaking, I heard a rattling noise. The bones were coming together! I saw muscles and skin cover the bones, but they had no life in them.”

With the students of Ms Gruwell, there is a sense that the bones are rattling around, and beginning to come together. Let’s see if there’s any life there yet.”

(music fade out at video up)

3:07 VIDEO: part 2

----- **NARRATION**

“It seems that Erin Gruwell is beginning to have an impact on the lives of those young people who are in her care. She’s beginning to see some life in them.

“In much the same way, Ezekiel sees a similar thing in his vision. Continuing with the Bible passage, we find this:

Ezekiel 37: 9-12a, 13a

“The Lord said: Ezekiel, now say to the wind, “God commands you to blow from every direction and to breathe life into these dead bodies, so they can live again.”

“As soon as I said this, the wind blew among the bodies, and they came back to life! They all stood up, and they were enough to make a large army.”

“God said, “Ezekiel, the people of Israel are like dead bones. They complain that they are dried up and that they have no hope for the future.”

“So tell them, “I, your God, promise to open your graves and set you free...My Spirit will give you breath, and you will live again.”

:15 **NARRATION**

“In the video, we are already beginning to see how the breath of life has been breathed into these young people—youth who didn’t think they had a prayer of living into their 20’s, young men and women who thought their lives were over even before they had begun.

“Let’s see how their story continues.”

2:17 **VIDEO: Part 3**

(Begin with Chung: “Erin Gruwell and her students were on a roll”,

----- **NARRATION**

“In our Bible passage, Ezekiel concludes the story of the vision he had as he hears God speak these words: “My Spirit will give you breath, and you will live again. I will bring you home, and you will know that I have kept my promise. I, your God, have spoken.”

“Ezekiel envisions the eternal promise of God coming into reality once again for the people of Israel, certainly, but that promise is for all of us, too.

“And like Ezekiel’s story, the story of the Freedom Writers is a story of new life and hope. Let’s take a look.”

3:20 **VIDEO: Part 4**

----- **NARRATION**

“In many ways, the story Ezekiel tells is an Easter story, a death-resurrection story, a tale of new life. At one time or another, probably every one of us has or will experience a sense of hopelessness and despair. We feel as though we are dried up, and out of life and vitality. We have a sense of being distanced or cut off from life itself. It’s as though we are dead, dry bones with no life at all.

“But the promise of our faith is that the Spirit of God can and will breathe life into us, and we can live again. Whenever a teacher, a friend, a life mate, or a mentor inspires us, whenever someone helps us see hope when we thought all was lost, whenever we feel our heart start to beat again when we thought life was gone—that is God working in and through the people around us to breathe life into us.

“The promise God had made to us is unbroken. We can trust and know that new life is ours, because God said, “I will put breath in you, and once again you will live.”

CLOSING

“Goethe once wrote these words: ‘Sometimes our fate resembles a fruit tree in winter. Who would think that those branches would turn green again and blossom, but we hope it; we know it.’

“That’s the way it is with each of us. Even when everything seems hopeless and lost, there is hope for new life, because God promises it.

“So as you leave here this morning, go in peace, and go in hope. Amen.”