

Walking up to the restaurant you may wonder why anyone would want to open a restaurant here. Empty store windows and boarded up glass, rundown buildings, and signs of long term poverty mark the neighbourhood. You are standing at 541 Barton Street East in Hamilton, in one of the most impoverished neighbourhoods in the city.

The large clean windows reveal a bright and inviting room with large communal tables and an astonishing mix of customers. Entering the restaurant you are met with an eclectic group of customers. The food looks fresh, nutritious, and made with love and care. As you go up to order you notice something unusual at the cash register. Two large mason jars with buttons in them. A sign tells you about the buttons. One jar has buttons you can buy for a dollar each. The second jar has buttons you can use to purchase your meal – you can use up to five buttons at a time. And yes, five buttons will indeed get you a full meal – two eggs and toast for breakfast, a BLT or bowl of chili the rest of the day.

541 Eatery and Exchange is a non-profit cafe. Their mission statement reads “Our mission at 541 Eatery and Exchange is to serve the local community in tangible ways through the love of Jesus Christ.” It was started by members of a nearby church. They had a vision of food and friendship for everyone beyond economic divides. They have learned to honour the gifts and resiliency of the people of the neighbourhood and offer space to facilitate community initiatives, skills training opportunities, and

youth events. Out of deep faith the people of 541 Eatery and Exchange don't just see the most impoverished neighbourhood in Hamilton they see God at work in people's lives.

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"Human one, can these bones live?" Ezekiel's dream self stares out over the valley of dried out bones. If this were not a dream, a holy vision, Ezekiel would probably run away from such a haunting and disturbing place. Can these bones live? Looking out over the parched land and the bleached skeletons the only logical answer for Eziekiel is no.

The Book of Ezekiel is set within the Babylonian Exile around the 7th Century B.C. The Babylonian Empire has conquered the kingdom of Judah and the political, economic, and social leaders have been deported to Babylon. Far from their homeland the promise of God's covenant with the people seems broken, return appears to be an impossibility, all feels hopeless and life seems to have given way to dry bones.

Can these bones live?

Over the last five weeks of Lent we have been diving deep into our faith by exploring stewardship. Our faith reminds us that all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God. Stewardship invites us to faithfully respond to this reality in the way we use and share God's gifts.

Today we are being pulled into God's powerful Spirit and dropped into a very difficult place – we are being strong armed into the valley of dry bone places in our lives and in our world. God's Spirit draws us into the difficult

question: If all that we have and all that we are is a gift from God, if life is a blessing, if there is abundance in God's gift then what about the valley of dry bones moments in our lives, in our homes, in our community, and in our world. How do we respond in the midst of such deep sorrow, pain, hopelessness, fear, exclusion, injustice, and so much more that make us feel like we are standing in the parched valley of dry bones.

Many of us know the dry bone places well. We experience them in our own lives in the places where things like fear, hopelessness, exclusion, suffering, and grief seem overpowering. We experience dry bone places in our community as we look around and see the need, the pain, the brokenness of our neighbours. We see it in our world whenever we listen, watch, or read the news and are flooded with stories of tragedy, war, injustice, and violence.

The hardest part of the story from the Book of Ezekiel that we hear today is that just as God's Spirit picked up and dropped Ezekiel into the valley of dry bones so too does God leads us into the difficult places of life. We cannot hide away from it, ignore it, or tune it out because God's powerful Spirit picks us up and drops us into the valley and says "look around and tell me can these bones live?"

Everything within him says "no" but Ezekiel is wise, that's why he's a prophet, and so instead he of "no" he says "God, only you know."

"Prophecy over these bones" God commands and as Ezekiel repeats God's words Ezekiel watches as bone joins bone, cells reform, muscle and

flesh appear. "Prophecy to the breath" God commands and as Ezekiel says the words breath enters the bodies and life is restored. "Prophecy to my people," God says and no longer is Ezekiel standing in the dreamscape of holy vision but with eyes open he sees the needs of his people and how God is at work through him. Can these bones live? Ezekiel discovers that God is at work in what appears to be a hopeless situation. "I will raise you up from your graves, my people, and I will bring you to Israel's fertile land... I will put my breath in you, and you will live."

Lent invites us into the valley of the dry bones. Holy week will soon be upon us and will invite us to follow Christ into the valley of the dry bones where violence, fear, and injustice will seem all consuming and completely destructive. We will be invited to walk the path of the cross and crucifixion before we emerge on the side of resurrection. Jesus will be God's powerful Spirit that grabs hold of us and puts us into the very midst of the suffering in our lives and world and asks us the chilling question "can these bones live?"

The answer that Ezekiel reminds us, that Easter will invite us to live, is not "no." The answer is for us to stand in the mist of the valley and ask "What might God do in this impossible situation?"

Rev. Dave Jagger reflects on this question writing: "instead of a question of abandon and surrender... it becomes a question of faith and hope. What might God do in this impossible situation? I wonder... Let's find out. Let's watch for it and expect it. For God is surely in this place and time. God is surely about God's mission in our lives and through our lives."

Today we are reminded that our life, this gift of God that is us and all of our time, skill, passions, and possessions is a part of God's response to the dry bone places of life.

This week, our spiritual practice is this: we are invited to carry the question and the invitation "What might God do in this impossible situation" with us as we journey through this week. When you read or watch the news ask "What might God do in this impossible situation?" When you see poverty, violence, pain, exclusion, or aching in your community ask "what might God do in this impossible situation? When you face your own struggle and suffering ask "what might God do in this impossible situation?" And listen, listen for God's responding "human one, prophesy to the breath" Feel God's spirit at work in you. Think about or write down one answer, one small seed of hope that comes to you as you look out over the dry bone places with God's courage to guide you. The seed of hope may not seem big enough to change much. Ezekiel probably didn't think his prophesying could do much. But that one seed of hope alive within us alongside many other seeds of hope, nourished and cared for, is a gift from God that brings life even into dry valleys.

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Several years ago a group of people from a church looked out over an impoverished neighbourhood and asked "what might God do through us in this impossible situation." Today we listen to God's words "I will put my breath in you, and you will live." What might God do in this situation? Let us stand with Ezekiel, walk with Christ, and be part of the amazing things that God is doing right here and right now. Amen. Thanks be to God.