

# “Our Dry Souls Are Thirsting”

Ezekiel 37:1-14 & Matthew 4:1-11

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**Ezekiel 37:1-14 NLT** “The Lord took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the Lord to a valley filled with bones. God led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out. Then God asked me, “Son of man, can these bones become living people again?” “O Sovereign Lord,” I replied, “you alone know the answer to that.” Then God said to me, “Speak a prophetic message to these bones and say, ‘Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’” So, I spoke this message, just as God told me. Suddenly as I spoke, there was a rattling noise across the valley. The bones of each body came together and attached themselves as complete skeletons. Then as I watched, muscles and flesh formed over the bones. Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them. Then God said to me, “Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.’” So, I spoke the message as God commanded me, and breath came into their bodies. They all came to life and stood up on their feet—a great multitude. Then God said to me, “Son of man, these bones represent the people of Israel. They are saying, ‘We have become old, dry bones—all hope is gone. Our nation is finished.’ Therefore, prophesy to them and say, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel. When this happens, O my people, you will know that I am the Lord. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land. Then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done what I said. Yes, the Lord has spoken!’”

**Matthew 4:1-11** “Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted there by the devil. For forty days and forty nights he fasted and became very hungry. During that time the devil came and said to Jesus, “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become loaves of bread.” But Jesus told him, “No! The Scriptures say, ‘People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Jesus to the holy city, Jerusalem, to the highest point of the Temple, and said, “If you are the Son of God, jump off! For the Scriptures say, ‘God will order angels to protect you. And they will hold you up with their hands, so you won’t even hurt your foot on a stone.’” Jesus responded, “The Scriptures also say, ‘You must not test the Lord your God.’” Next the devil took Jesus to the peak of a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. “I will give it all to you,” he said, “if you will kneel down and worship me.” “Get out of here, Satan,” Jesus told him. “For the Scriptures say, ‘You must worship the Lord your God and serve only God.’” Then the devil went away, and angels came and took care of Jesus.

Ironically one of the most difficult and dangerous backpacking trips I have completed was on a smooth, easy portion of the Appalachian Trail. The trail names, Bake Oven Knob and Lehigh Furnace reflect the challenge. A century of Zinc mining has killed almost all the vegetation for twenty miles on the Blue Ridge Mountain and contaminated all the water making it unsafe to drink. All that remains from the once lush towering forest is a little scrub vegetation. The result is a 25-mile hike with no water source and no shade, so you feel like you are in a bake oven and a furnace. The loss of vegetation makes it a dry, dusty, hike in the sweltering sun. The wind constantly pelted me with dust and sucked the moisture from my body. Psychologically, the hike is made even worse by the view of the Lehigh River over 1,000 feet below. I could see people boating, tubing, and swimming and every so often I could hear a squeal of delight as someone enjoyed the water. Not me, I was rationing every drop of my water trying to avoid becoming dangerously dehydrated.

Most of us take water for granted because of the abundance of drinks all around us. Seldom do we need to worry about suffering or dying from dehydration. In the U.S. we have a multi trillion-dollar thirst, spending 11 million on bottled water alone. Water is the essential source of life to every plant and animal. Water is a dominate symbol throughout the Bible. Our souls are dry, thirsty, lifeless and mere dust without God's living, abundant, invigorating, eternal water.

The first psalm says we all most choose how we are going to live life. Option one is to go through life without God, becoming worthless dry chaff tossed about by the winds of competing voices. Option two is to go through life with God, being nourished by an everlasting stream of God's blessings, vitalizing you into a blessing bearer. With God one becomes like a majestic, fruit bearing tree sustained by an always flowing stream.

The gospel of John explains Jesus as the vine, and we are the branches. Apart from God we can do nothing, we wither, dry out and are burned in the fire. Abiding in God we are nourished, vibrant and bear juicy fruit.

Psalm 42 compares us to a deer panting, thirsting, longing for a refreshing drink from a cool stream, so our souls' thirst, long and need the refreshment that only God can provide. Those who come to God are rejuvenated. For each day the Lord pours God's unfailing love upon them." **Psalm 63:1** declares, **"O God, you are my God; I earnestly search for you. My soul thirsts for you; my whole-body longs for you in the parched and weary land where there is no water."**

The Bible has several accounts of people quenching their thirst with God. Nicodemus discovered how to be born of the Spirit through the waters of baptism. The Samaritan woman found life by drinking God's living water. A few weeks ago, we explored how Jesus healed with mere spit mixed with dust to give vision. Jesus revealed that love never ends as Jesus' tears brought Lazarus back to life after being buried in a tomb for four days. On Palm Sunday, we celebrate how Jesus poured out himself for us, so we can have abundant life. The culmination is Easter, Jesus' glorious resurrection, raining life into each of us and the entire world.

Many of you began your Lenten journey by receiving the ashes on Ash Wednesday as a sign that we need God's purifying fire to burn away the clutter and choking, unhealthy habits in our life, so wonderful habits can flourish. The ash reminds us of our frailty that without God we are nothing and can do nothing. The ash reminds us of the grit, grime, and ugliness of our sin. In nature, carbon ash under pressure in time becomes a diamond. Jesus looks beyond the ash and sees all of us as diamonds in the rough in need of God's grace to transform us into eternal brilliance. Lent is a transformational journey taking us from the bad news of Ash Wednesday's sin, death, grief, ashes, and thirst to the extravagant love, abundant life, exuberant joy, flourishing growth, and living water of Easter. God invites us all to journey and encourages us to repent. Will you accept God's invitation to drink deep of God's grace nourishing you into a fully alive Easter person?

Today we join Jesus in the wilderness to discover how to avoid the scorching allure of dry choices. Jesus went to the wilderness to fast, to get away from clamoring voices and the hustle and bustle of life. Jesus went to the wilderness for solitude so for awhile he could get rid of distractions and focus on hearing God's will for his life. Jesus is in the wilderness to decide what kind of person he is going to become. Jesus is discerning his calling, the direction for his life just like all of us must decide.

Jesus' time in the wilderness is reminiscent of the Israelites in the wilderness who must decide if they want to go back to slavery in Egypt or go forward to the Promise Land loving God and one another. It is reminiscent of Psalm 1. All of us must decide if we are going to be guided by God becoming a nourished fruit bearer or guided by self becoming dry chaff. It is reminiscent of the valley of dry bones. Sin-dried people, who have lost hope, must decide if they will persist in the brittleness of sin or receive the Spirit of God who helps each person rediscover the vitality of their life.

When one steps back and looks at the big picture the choice seems so obvious and easy to make; yet, when one zooms in on the little everyday decisions that set one's course, the choice is subtle and complex. Even Jesus, God's own son, fully God, had to pause, reflect and resist temptation, so his fully human nature would not lead him astray.

God has given us a wonderful and destructive gift, free will. God has given us the gift to choose. Temptation is subtle, seductive and progressive. The tempter's goal is to initially get us just a degree off course knowing that over time this can lead to a 180-degree shift, causing us to live life in the absolute wrong direction. We trivialize sin when we limit it to big errors of judgment rather than small decisions of choosing the easier, inferior, less loving choice. Sometimes we limit our definition of sin to things we do when often it is what we fail to do that gets us in dry predicaments. Sin is flawed decision making that invites us to live in the moment, to make the short term easy comfortable choice. The danger is over time one becomes comfortable with the easy choice and becomes unaware of better choices.

Our scripture today shows us three common temptations that all of us face that Jesus overcame. Jesus was fasting using his physical hunger and thirst as a reminder of his deeper spiritual hunger and thirst which can only be satisfied by God. Jesus' physical hunger reminded him to pray; but, as he knelt to pray his spiritual retreat was disrupted with a tempting voice—a whisper, a thought pattern. “If you are God's child, command this stone, so that it becomes bread.” Jesus was the first person tempted by fast food. In an instant Jesus could transform a stone into a delicious moist loaf of bread. Who will it hurt? Why shouldn't Jesus have what he wants, when he wants it and have it his way? We all struggle with our hunger. Our economy thrives off creating the perception that we need all sorts of stuff. Advertisers strive to increase our appetites at every turn. This first temptation is to take shortcuts trying to satisfy our hunger with worldly goods instead of Godly nourishment. It is a me centered, me first temptation. It is to choose the path of least effort passing on what's eternally best for what's momentarily satisfying. We are tempted to choose the easy way partaking of fleeting delights when we realize how hard it is to partake of that which is truly satisfying, to forgive, listen, serve, love and share. It is choosing the extra effort of recycling, renewable energy, public transportation and caring for the environment. It is choosing the extra effort of caring for those less fortunate than you. It is choosing to sacrifice for others. The tempting voice reasons I have worked hard, I am hungry, I deserve to enjoy this (you fill in the blank) instead of waiting and using your resources to love another. Jesus replied, “One cannot live by bread alone.” There is much more to life than satisfying one's hunger with earthly goods. In time, Jesus would make bread from nothing but not to satisfy his personal hunger rather to feed the hungry crowds and be the bread of life through the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Jesus' second temptation is a fantasy of fame. In those days the people believed that the Messiah would reveal himself from the temple roof. This temptation is to give in to the expectations of others and to prove one's own worth. Jesus could have thrown himself down from the temple roof and the soft landing provided by the angels would have been a dazzling crowd pleaser. Jesus is tempted to skip the hard work of the cross and be what the people wanted him to be and enjoy their worship. For awhile this would be wonderful until the end, for without the cross there is no atonement and Jesus would not be able to be our savior. This temptation is to polish your outer appearance at the neglect of your inner integrity; to be a people pleaser instead of being an honest disciple speaking God's truth. Jesus said, “Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” God invites us to live by faith not by illusions. God invites us to enjoy true growth not quick, hollow success. God invites us to transform reality instead of chasing fleeting fantasies. God invites us to journey past ignorant bliss to an appreciation of Jesus' sacrificial love that saves us from the sinful mess we have made of our lives and the world. We are not to test God demanding quick fix miracles, rather love God in gratitude discovering the greatest miracle of eternal healing through Christ.

Jesus' final temptation is an urge to compromise, to exchange the moral high road for the low road of delights, palaces, and kingdoms. Compromise, and it's all yours. This is Frodo Baggins offering the one ring that rules them all. This is Darth Vader inviting Luke to join him on the dark side with its power and control. This is cheating on an exam to get ahead. Forgoing family time to get overtime and a little bigger house. Shunning service to enjoy entertainment. Failing to give credit to a co-worker to get a promotion. Filling one's minds with thoughts of entitlement instead of humble giving. Jesus answered the compromising voice, "Bow down to God alone; worship only God." There is no room for compromise if you are loving God, one another and yourself with all your heart, soul and mind.

All of us have succumbed to these and many other temptations leaving us parched. We are as Ezekiel described a heap of dry bones. Our sins disperse toxins scorching the world and sucking the life out of us leaving us dry brittle and hopeless wanderers in a dusty world. God told Ezekiel to prophesize to these dry, parched people. Tell them of my love, forgiveness and power. Invite them to receive the living, invigorating water of the Holy Spirit. As the people drank in God's Spirit, bone came to bone, vigor, strength and vitality filled every person until a vast multitude leapt and danced in joy.

All of us have a deep thirst for God. Drink in God's living water. We gather to help each other find paths through lush green pastures beside ever flowing streams. Amen