

Digging up Bones!

May 17, 2026

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Ephesians 3:14-21, Psalm 1

Neighbor Day Outdoor service - 2026

Back in 1835 a group of Christian believers came together to form the First Baptist Church of Westerly. God had given them a vision for the future and the church grew and prospered. Before long they built a building in the center of the town square and their members made an impact in this coastal town. Proverbs 29:18 says,

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

What Solomon is suggesting is that for a people, a church, a nation, to thrive and succeed, they need to follow a God given vision for the future. It isn't about having a program or a strategy for growth as much as it is a desire to listen for the voice of God and follow his leading.

In his book, Can These Bones Live?, Pastor Josh McClure suggests that a church will only survive for so long without a vision from God. He shares how when he began his ministry at the Pleasant Street Baptist Church God gave him a vision of a vital ministry that could grow there... I was with him one day and he pointed to the wall of their fellowship hall and said to me, “I see God's writing on that wall as plainly as I see your face.” He told his small congregation that if the people were faithful to God's call,

they would blossom and grow. And they did. In Pastor Josh's book, he says that the church's primary mission is not to labor for survival but rather to bring people to a saving relationship with Jesus. If you lose sight of that, McLure says, no amount of human intervention can prevent the decline and death spiral of the church.

In our own congregation, the people came to that realization in 1945. After the split that formed Calvary Baptist Church in 1870, the leaders of the two congregations came together in prayer and felt that God was calling for them to merge and enlarge their impact for Christ in the town. They had a vision, I believe, that was God given. The vision was to share the gospel and impact the community for Christ. They did that. Central Baptist was the result of that effort. God blessed us. Our ministry included over 1,000 members, two services, a radio ministry and a great children's outreach.

Dr. Alfred Murray and the leaders of that congregation believed the Word of God where it says in Ephesians 3,

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

They dreamed the impossible dream and God delivered. He brought those two congregations together and they flourished. You see, Scripture is right. If we trust him, God can truly do more that we can ever imagine. We simply need to trust and obey.

We can learn a lot from history. Like many churches, Israel had experienced the ups and downs throughout their history. But when their situation seemed most hopeless, God would send a prophet to light a spark that could ignite a flame that would lead them to renewal and hope again.

Such was the case in the sixth century BC. The people had been taken into captivity and were living in Babylonia. Ezekiel was living among them when God called him to prophesy. The people found themselves in these deplorable conditions because they had abandoned their love of God and were living like the pagans all around them. They had lost all hope and were caught in what could be described as a death spiral. The nation was on the verge of extinction. That is the background of our passage today. God gave Ezekiel a vision to share with his people.

The Israelites were pictured as a valley of dry bones. They were disconnected and bleached dry by the sun. In the vision God asked Ezekiel a question, "Can these bones live?"

In country artist Randy Travis' 1986 hit song, "Digging up Bones," the singer talks about a love that is dead and buried and better left alone. Sometimes it seems like all we have are memories of the past. The good times are gone and we are living on borrowed time. That was how the Israelites felt. I have no doubt that Ezekiel's inkling in answering God was to say, "No way. These bones are beyond saving."

A lot of people feel that way about the church. Across America churches are shrinking and closing. In town here, we have had at least four churches die in the last fifteen years and a few others that are on life support. You look at our church: We are doing pretty good. Yet, I'd say our average is about 70 years old. What does our future look like?

That's where our passage comes in. God showed Ezekiel that with God's intervention even dried bones can live again. So that bodes well for congregations like ours as we draw close to our 200th anniversary. I believe we will be here and stronger than ever because I believe in a God who can make dry bones live. With God, all things are possible.

Ezekiel wisely answers God's question by saying, "Lord, you alone know the answer to that question." Ezekiel understood that he was limited but that God wasn't. The first thing God told Ezekiel to do was to prophesy.... To pray... to speak directly to the situation.

Too often we ignore what's going on around us. We bury our heads in the sand. We don't want to hear bad news. That's what has been happening in our society for a long time. We've been sliding down a slippery slope and leaving God behind. Our churches have become irrelevant because we have been too focused on survival... as opposed to our calling to, as it says, in Isaiah 61,

To proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion— to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Sometimes we need a reminder of our calling if we are to fulfill our calling as God's people.

One Sunday morning a man entered the church and sat down near the front with his hat on. Noting the man, one of the deacons spoke to him, asking him if he knew he forgot to remove his hat.

"Yes," the man replied. "I realize I have my hat on. I've been coming to this church for two months and this is the only way I could get anyone to speak to me."

When you look around and see very few young people in the congregation, that's a wake-up call.

15 years ago I heard a well know speaker talk about church attendance. She said that today (2010) the percentage of people attending church regularly across the United States, Catholic and Protestant, was 17%. She said, "If we don't do something today, that number will be 4% in fifteen years. People were puzzled. Then she said, "Think about your congregations. How many gray-haired people are there and where will they be in 15 years?"

We've bucked the trend. We survived and came back after Covid. But we have a challenge ahead of us. **I believe dry bones can live because God said they can.**

In Mark 11:23 we read,

"Truly, I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them.

What authority do we have to change the course of history? If we do nothing, then nothing will happen. We need to address the situation. Even if things look hopeless now, they are not going to remain that way.

It is true in the church and it is true in our personal lives. You may feel you are at a dead end. You've tried everything you know how to do...but nothing seems to be working. Then God has a word of for you. He can make the dry bones live again. He can turn your situation around. He can make the possible, possible.

I can't tell you how important the Bible is in finding hope to go on. It is filled with stories of impossible things coming to pass. A woman who was sick with a flow of blood for years is healed. A child who has died is brought back to life. A man who was wracked with epilepsy and tied down with chains is brought back to his right mind. A man who was terrorizing his neighbors is changed in an instant. It is all by the power of God.

God said to those dead bones, "I will breath life into them. I will knit the tendons together again. I will restore flesh to them and they will live again. Guess what? IT happened just as God said.

Miracles CAN happen and WILL happen in your life and mine is we are listening to God's voice and prepared to do his will. Change may not happen immediately but it will happen. In Ezekiel, we see a little indication that something was happening at first - A NOISE, a SHAKING. Then the bones came together. It was only a skeleton. And then came the flesh.

When we feel that things are hopeless, we may not recognize the LITTLE improvements that begin to take place. But we need to be alert for even the smallest signs and then thank and praise God.

I believe God is planning great things, not only for each of you. For us as a church. Don't say, I'm too old or I'm too young. Don't say we've tried that before. Trust God and believe. Look for the signs and then lean into them. If God opens a door, walk through it. In the coming months we are going to go all out in an effort to share Christ with families, children, youth, neighbors and seniors. We are going to live in to our first love, the sharing of the good News of the gospel. I believe that we can buck the trend and grow into a wonderful future. God loves revival and we are going to claim it here at Central and I hope you will be a part of it. So let's speak into those dead bones and start digging. Amen