



Weaving God's Promises

LESSON 12 **EZEKIEL GIVES HOPE**

If you want to tell all of the stories, you will need to divide this lesson into several class sessions.

SUMMARY OF TODAY'S STORY

Ezekiel describes his vision, famous as the Valley of Dry Bones. In this vision, he is taken to a valley full of bones and the Lord commands him to say to the bones, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

As Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, they begin to come together, but without breath. When he prophesies to the breath, the bones come alive in a vast multitude.

God tells the prophet that these bones are the whole house of Israel and that God will put God's spirit into the people of Israel and they shall live. Israel will become a nation again.

Other stories tell how Ezekiel is told by God to do some strange things to demonstrate to the people of Israel what will become of them. These visions take place just before Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed, just before the first group of inhabitants is deported to Babylon, Ezekiel being one of them.

KEY CONCEPTS

- Despair
- Vision
- Reconciliation

WHERE YOU'LL FIND TODAY'S STORY

In the Bible

We recommend the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*.

2 Kings 24–25

In Our Sunday Lectionary

These stories are not told in church on any Sunday.



WEAVING OUR STORY WITH THE BIBLICAL STORY

Ezekiel is thought to have been part of the first group of people to be taken out of his land and sent to Babylon for exile.

During the stormy and confusing days before Jerusalem is taken and destroyed, Ezekiel is given a series of visions by God. In these visions, he sees that the glory of God leaves Jerusalem just before its fall. This will explain to the people why the Temple was allowed to be destroyed—because God is no longer there (Ezekiel 10). He is also told to warn the people of the impending doom of the city and its people, God's punishment because "all the house of Israel have a hard forehead and a stubborn heart" (Ezekiel 3:7). Later, God, through Ezekiel, will tell the people that God will give them a "new heart" and a "new spirit" (Ezekiel 36:26). But first the people will be sent into exile.

During the Exile, which lasted for around 50–60 years, Ezekiel shares his visions of hope for the people of Israel, who may have begun to doubt whether they were still God's people.

If we put ourselves in the place of the exiles—like good storytellers—we can easily imagine the feelings of despair at their circumstances, longing for their beloved homeland, grief at losing their homes, devastation at the destruction of their city and their Temple, and maybe even guilt because the Exile was seen as punishment for their faithlessness and evil ways. They have been exiled to the capital of an evil empire and they know that their land will go to ruin without their care.

In the depth of their despair, Ezekiel prophesies that Israel will eventually live again, that the people will be made whole with God's spirit breathed into them. The Valley of Dry Bones vision is a beautiful image of the promise of new life that God gives them during this dark time.

This is one of the nine readings that may be read at the Great Vigil of Easter, promising as it does new life and new hope for us, which we experience in the coming of Jesus Christ and in his death and resurrection.

If the Valley of Dry Bones story is used as a lesson, you should try to put the vision in the context of the people's sins of faithlessness and their subsequent defeat, their exile in the past, their return to their homeland, and then Jesus' coming to reconcile them with God in the future (around 300 years later).

As Ezekiel prepares his people to return home, we can see how we can prepare to return to God from our own Fall.

Because this is the last lesson before Advent and our preparation for the coming of Jesus Christ, we suggest that you tell about how the exile ends.

King Cyrus the Great of Persia, upon overtaking Babylonia, decides to rule by allowing the people to return to their own land under limited sovereignty. They are also allowed to worship as they please. So the Israelites come back to their Promised Land, but now it is a desolate homeland.

The Israelites need to rebuild—their homes, their lands, their towns and, above all, their Temple, which has been destroyed. They are discouraged, but Ezra the priest and Nehemiah, who is appointed governor of the region, lead the people in the restoration project. Ezra reads the Law and leads the way for renewed faithfulness to the Law of God by the people. He jolts their memory of what God asks of them: to be a holy people, the chosen people of God.

This story reminds us that God stays with us, no matter what.



THE EPISCOPAL THREAD

The vision of the Valley of Dry Bones is such an image of hope for restoration of God's people that it is one of the readings in the Liturgy of the Word at the Great Vigil of Easter.

As strange as Ezekiel was, we as Episcopalians may be able to relate to him, for ours is an intuitive faith more than an intellectual one. We use symbols as much as words. We balance the word of God with the drama of the Holy Eucharist in our service.

Our rites make much use of symbol and we see our sacraments as the "outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace" (Catechism, p. 857, *Book of Common Prayer*).



GATHERING

Check-In

Invite group members to sit comfortably, giving them an opportunity to visit with each other, establish friendships and build community. Relationships are an important dimension of Christian formation, so a few minutes of visiting will enrich their spiritual development. This is also the perfect time to "check in" with group members by asking them to share how they are feeling at the time or what kind of a week they had.



PRAYER

Materials:

- small table with cloth to cover it
- large pillar candle or large Christ candle
- matches
- cross

After all group members have a few minutes of fellowship time, gather them together for a simple opening prayer. Ask one of the members to light a pillar candle while saying these words from Psalm 119:105:

- Your word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

Explain that you are inviting the light of God to be with all of you. (You might consider posting that verse from Psalm 119 in the meeting room).

Invite the member who lit the candle to read this prayer:

- Lord God, you comfort us when we need help, you encourage us when we are discouraged, you help us through hard times. Stay with us, we pray, wherever we go, and especially be with us here as we hear your stories. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

Carefully extinguish the candle.



TELLING THE STORY

Set the scene:

- Before you tell the story of Ezekiel, play hymn #508 from *The Hymnal 1982*, (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 1985).
- Distribute hymnals so the group members can read the lyrics while it is being played. Invite them to sing aloud if they wish.

You may wish to preface today's story with the context in which Ezekiel has his vision: the Exile and then the end of the Exile, along with the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple.

Read the story from the Bible or tell it in your own words. At this time you do not need to explain or discuss the story. This is the time for the youth to hear the story. For now, simply let them absorb it in their minds and in their hearts. Later, use the discussion or arts time to help the group members draw appropriate and meaningful connections between the story and their own lives.



WEAVING OUR FAITH

Lesson Box

Materials:

- 1 3" x 5" index card for the day's *scribe*
- pen or pencil
- a file box in which to store the cards

Ask for a volunteer or assign a group member to act as *scribe*. Then, ask the group to articulate the most important lesson gleaned from the day's reading. As prompts, you might ask:

- What would we be willing to do for God?
- Where do you find hope in God?

Once the group has agreed on its wording, ask the *scribe* to write the lesson on the card, date it, and file it in the box. By the end of the year, you will have a wonderful and thorough summation of the lessons covered in the participants' own words.



WEAVING GOD'S BELOVED COMMUNITY

You are not dead; these bones shall live. The people have lost their homeland, their holy city, and their homes. Everything they possessed was taken away from them. And yet, God gives them hope that their future will be bright again.

Many people in our world, our country, and even our neighborhoods live without basic necessities in life. Many people are homeless, or hungry, or without livelihood, and struggle to see a way out of their hopelessness. Jesus would ask us to be empathetic—know what it's like in their shoes, learn how they feel, have mercy for the "other." In a Beloved Community, empathy towards others keeps the community together.

- What is something that makes you feel better when you're upset?

- How do you comfort those around you who are hurt?
- What are some examples of people not having everything they need in our community?
- How can we help people get what they need?



CLOSING PRAYER

Before the group leaves, say a closing prayer to send them into the church worship service or back to their homes in the knowledge of God's love and protection. The prayer can be very simple and straightforward, such as this one:

- O Lord God, Ezekiel saw that you breathe your spirit into your people to give them life. Breathe your spirit into us every single day, so that we can do your will wherever we go, and so that we may then spread your spirit to others who do not know you. We ask this in the name of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

End the lesson with a dismissal that is used in church, such as:

- Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord.

The youth respond:

- Thanks be to God!



Weaving God's Promises

SWEET, SWEET HOPE

Part 1 of this activity is a “Reflect and Relate” activity; part 2 is a “Translate and Tell” activity.

Participants bake simple cookies for distribution to the entire congregation. In addition, they will write messages of HOPE and GOOD WISHES to accompany the homemade “fortune” cookies.

Part 1: Cookies

Materials:

In addition to the ingredients for the cookies themselves, you will need:

- 2 large mixing bowls
- measuring spoons and cups
- electric hand mixer
- spatulas
- cookie sheets
- oven mitts
- platters

Preparation:

Invite the group to come to church a bit early so you have time to bake and write. Gather the ingredients and supplies for the baking.

Or instead of making cookies from scratch, purchase some ready-to-bake cookie dough from the grocery store.

Directions:

1. Using the recipe (p. 8), make two batches of the butter cookies.
2. While the cookies are baking, group members can write their own messages of hope and good wishes on strips of colored paper.

Part 2: Messages

Materials:

- sample fortune cookies (to introduce the concept of “cookies and messages”)
- colored paper, cut into 1" x 4" strips
- fine point pens or markers
- fortune cookies

Directions:

1. Give one or more fortune cookies to each member of the group.
2. Tell them to open the cookie (eat it if they wish) and read the fortune. (The fortunes are positive, hopeful and encouraging.)

3. Tell group to write messages of encouragement and hope on the slips of paper. Explain that they will be handing these out at coffee hour with the fresh-baked cookies. Some suggestions follow:
 - Hope every day is a happy day.
 - God is with you...always.
 - I will pray for you.
 - May the wind always be at your back.
 - God watches over you.
 - You are surrounded by people who love you.
 - We are all one family.

BUTTER COOKIE RECIPE

Ingredients:

- 1 cup butter
- 1 cup white sugar
- 1 egg
- 2²/₃ cups all-purpose flour
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons vanilla extract

Note: This recipe works better if the cookie dough is chilled for an hour before baking. We suggest *doubling* this recipe to have enough to go around.

Directions:

1. Preheat the oven to 400°.
2. In a large bowl, mix together the butter and white sugar until light and fluffy.
3. Beat in the egg. Then stir in the vanilla.
4. Combine the flour and salt; stir into the sugar mixture.
5. Cover dough, and chill for at least one hour. Chill cookie sheets.
6. Drop cookies by rounded teaspoons onto the chilled cookie sheets.
7. Bake for 8 to 10 minutes in the preheated oven, or until golden at the edges.
8. Allow cookies to cool for 10 minutes; then, remove from cookie sheets and place on platters for serving.
9. Make sure to hand out the hope messages with the cookies.



Weaving God's Promises

SYMBOLS SCAVENGER HUNT

Group members go on a scavenger hunt in and around the church to find symbols important to the Episcopal tradition and faith. This is a great intergenerational activity.

Materials:

- copies of the “Symbols List” (p. 10), 1 per participant
- pens and pencils
- optional:* digital cameras

Preparation:

Make copies of the “Symbols List” (p. 10) for every participant.

Let the priest know that the “hunt” will be taking place.

Enlist the help of a few volunteers to serve as guides or to help the youth along the way.

Directions:

1. This activity can be run as a tour or as a small group activity. If desired, you may make it a competition, as long as the youth are respectful of and quiet in the worship space. If a competition, ask the volunteers to sign each Symbols List as the participants come to their areas.
2. Give each participant a list of symbols for which to search. When they find them, they are to record where in the church it is located.
3. After all have returned to the meeting space, review what they found and talk about the meaning of each symbol.

Close:


- Once again, the information generated by this activity is perfect for a bulletin board, newsletter article or posting on the church website.

SYMBOLS LIST

Directions:

Check off each symbol as you locate it. BE SURE to note where you saw the symbol. Not all of the symbols will be found in this church.

_____ Alpha symbol—the first; the beginning 

_____ Omega symbol—the last; the end 

_____ Dove—peace

_____ Bread or hosts—Body of Christ

_____ Wine—the blood of Christ

_____ Cross—a symbol that Jesus died for our sins

_____ Candles—the light of God in our midst

_____ Ashes (during Lent)—repentance for our sins

_____ Paschal candle (Easter season)—resurrection

_____ Incense—the smoke represents our prayers going up to God

_____ Red doors—can mean a number of things: a reminder of Passover, God’s grace, the presence of the Holy Spirit, sanctuary (a refuge for all)

_____ Eternal flame or candle (always burning)—God’s constant presence

_____ Episcopal shield

_____ Lion and the lamb—peace and harmony

Altar colors: Check off the appropriate church season.

_____ Green: time after Pentecost

_____ Green: time after Epiphany

_____ White: Easter

_____ Red: Holy Week

_____ Purple or linen: Lent

_____ White: Christmas

_____ Purple or blue: Advent

What other symbols did you come across? Where?



Weaving God's Promises

KEEP HOPE ALIVE

Participants will listen to a Public Radio International (PRI) podcast called “Hope on a Pile of Bones” (part of the “Against All Odds” series) about the rebuilding of Rwanda, where victims and perpetrators of the past violence now live together in peace. The story of Rwanda is reminiscent of the fall and destruction of Jerusalem and Judah, and highlights the absolute necessity of keeping hope alive.

Note: This lesson is an important one, but the talk of the country’s violence may be too much for some youngsters. Talk to their parents first and explain the nature of the lesson.

Materials:

computer or phone with speakers

Preparation:

Locate the program on your favorite streaming platform so that you can play it for the group.

Directions:

1. Introduce the recordings by giving a brief background of the violence in Rwanda: In 1994, the long-standing tensions between the Tutsi and Hutu peoples of Rwanda escalated in violence and the slaughter of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 people. The uprising was depicted in the movie “Hotel Rwanda,” starring Don Cheadle as a hotel manager who rescues scores of Rwandans while putting his own life at risk.
2. Explain that Rwanda’s story is very similar to that of the story of Jerusalem and Judah. Its peoples were taken away, some put to death, relocated and their lands destroyed. Ezekiel prophesied that the Israelites would one day return to their promised land and live in peace.
3. Play Part 1 of the podcast, then ask for comments or reactions. If time permits, play parts 2 and 3. Continue the discussion after the last part.

Close:

- Play “Keep Hope Alive,” by PeeWee Callins (also available on streaming platforms).



Weaving God's Promises

PICTURES OF HOPE

Group members will create collages using original drawings, photos or magazine pictures that, to them, represent their hopes for themselves, their families, friends, community and the world at large.

Materials:

- sturdy backing poster board or other heavy paper, 8½" x 11" or 9" x 12"
- old news magazines and newspapers
- scissors
- markers
- colored pencils
- glue sticks

Directions:

1. Distribute a piece of poster board to each group member.
2. Explain that hope shows itself in different ways: a smile, a hug, a newborn, a flower bud, a new home, a helping hand, an invention, etc.
3. Ask group members to think about how and where they see hope for their lives, the lives of others, for the world. Tell them that they can focus their thoughts in a number of directions or with one theme (the environment, kindness, peace, health, cooperation, etc.)
4. Make available the magazines and newspapers. Group members draw or cut out pictures of the people and things that, for them, stand for hope, gluing them together on their poster board to create "hope collages."

Close:

- Display the completed collages in the meeting space or allow the participants to take them home.