

*The hand of the Lord came upon me. . .*

This is a loaded phrase – if you look it up in a concordance, you’ll find it used 36 times.

In general it refers to God’s power – but specifically in relation to human affairs.

...

In high school, I was walking down the hall toward the music room one day – I was supposed to be at lunch, but didn’t want to be in the cafeteria, so I headed for the music room.

As I was walking, a hand came down firmly on my shoulder, turned me around, and the assistant principal said, “Come with me.”

The hand of the principal stopped me in my tracks and caused me to endure circumstances I had hoped to avoid.

...

In the Bible, the hand of the Lord is often God’s power *against* human activity

- thwarting the plans of evil, as when the Philistines were stopped from defeating God’s people.
- The hand of the Lord made Naomi and her daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah widows,
- and caused Job to endure great suffering.

But the hand of the Lord is not power wielded for its own sake, as a tyrant might do

– **it is power exercised for the purpose of advancing God’s kingdom.**

## **Power used in service to reverent faith and eternal life.**

- After the Philistines were defeated, God's people were victorious in battle.
- After being widowed, Ruth the Moabite got married and prospered.
- After enduring suffering and loss, Job had his life returned to him.

The apostle Peter urges believers: *Humble yourselves under God's mighty hand, so that he may exalt you in due time.*

The hand of the Lord imposes challenges and difficulties to test our faith and make us stronger.

**As Christians, we accept and endure those difficult circumstances under the mighty hand of God**

until mercy and forgiveness are offered and received, and we are lifted up by that same hand of God.

It is good to remember that both the powerful pressure that burdens us and the release of forgiveness **are of God and from God.**

We can trust that God's heavy hand will not be upon us forever;

**we can trust that hand to let up and give us life.**

...

When the hand of the Lord came upon the prophet Ezekiel, we can already begin to guess that things will get worse before they get better.

That hand, with the Spirit of God, led him to a mass grave.

A valley of dry bones –

- Imagine the length of the Codorus Creek bed between Indian Rock Dam and John Rudy Park being dry of water and filled up with bones.
- Like 50 million jigsaw puzzle pieces just dumped out.

It must have been a horrible sight! I would have wanted to turn away at the sight – but the hand of the Lord prevents such cowardice.

The Lord had plans.

Plans for Ezekiel, plans for the bones.

Those plans begin –as they always do – in the heart of God – in love for all he has created.

...

The dry bones were God’s people –dead in their sins and the consequences of their wicked rebellion against God.

They had experienced the life without God that they said by their behavior they wanted – and discovered that it was a dead-end.

My mother had a saying for this, “You made your bed, now lie in it!”

“You made your choices, now accept the consequences.”

We all face times when we realize our choices have been bad for us and others.

When the bed we have made is harder and lonelier than we expected.

When the future seems hopeless and we just can't see how to go on.

When we feel as though God has abandoned us and we are condemned to death.

This week, my heart has been burdened with people

- facing the trauma of abortion,
- the impact of proposed environmental policies,
- And affected by addiction and mental illness.

Dry bones and dead-ends.

**Yet – to protect his own reputation as the God whose love never fails  
– the Lord acts to give life to the dead,**

Hope to the hopeless,

A future to those in the grave.

...

God's love becomes Word and Spirit – speech and breath.

The Hebrew word *ruach* means spirit, breath, and wind.

God's love in Word and Spirit was placed on the lips of the prophet Ezekiel:

*O dry bones! Hear the word of the Lord.*

(Our God is funny, right? As though bones can hear. )

*I will cause breath – my spirit – to enter you, and you shall live.*

(This is quite a show! The laughter just doesn't stop.)

*I will put muscles and tendons, ligaments and skin on you. I will breathe life into you.*

It is hard to keep from laughing – except – wait...

The bones are moving – there is rattling – they are finding their mates and coming together into full skeletons.

Is it possible? Did the bones really hear the Lord speak to them and obey?

Ezekiel watched the skeletons become covered with muscles and skin and hair and ears and noses and fingers as he spoke God's Word.

But they had no breath of life in them.

Only when God commanded the Spirit of life to come into them did they breathe and live.

*I will bring you up from your graves, O my people, and you shall know that I am the LORD.*

**God's love becomes Word and Spirit.**

**And became flesh in Jesus.**

Jesus is the one who gives life to the lifeless and his Spirit of life to those who are dead in sin.

Jesus is the one who becomes as the dry bones and who is raised from the dead and given life by the Father and the Spirit.

Jesus is the one who now causes graves to open and the people of God to arise in triumph.

And to whose voice even the dead and buried listen.

Lazarus – Come out! It’s as funny as God speaking to bones – until the dead guy walks out of the tomb on his own power!

...

Dear people of God – Do not for one moment think that these stories of dry bones and Lazarus are about other people long ago;

That they have nothing to do with you.

**These have everything to do with you.**

You, too, were dry bones –

dead and buried like Lazarus in sin

– and by the word and Spirit of God attached to the waters of Baptism, **you were raised from the dead.**

Yes—you!

This morning, you came here dead in your sins – as did I

– famished from starvation of mercy

and thirsty for the refreshment of hope.

And by God’s word and Spirit attached to bread and wine,

**we are given new life and strengthened in hope for the future.**

Every morning, by his Word and Spirit, God opens our graves and calls us to come out and live in the light of his presence.

We don’t deserve it – we are among the worst repeat offenders! –

**, but God's reputation demands it.**

**We belong to him, we bear his name,**  
and he will not abandon us to ourselves.

Jesus has accepted the full weight of the hand of God on our behalf and given his life on the cross.

**The release of his resurrection is now also our release from the burdens of life.**

Life's circumstances may knock us over temporarily, but they can no longer overpower us.

The love of God, expressed in Word and Spirit through Jesus Christ, always gives life in the face of death.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.