

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church

By Chris Fillingham

“Bones of Desire”

1st in the series *Advent Longing*

Ezekiel 37:1-11

December 10, 2017

I imagine by now a lot of you have your Christmas trees up, and your decorations out, and you've been shopping for a few gifts and even started your holiday baking.

If you haven't... I have one word for you: “15.”

That's the number of days you have left, people.

2 weeks!

Let's be honest: even if you've started, you're probably behind.

So, get on it!

You know the drill.

The kids can hardly wait. Two more weeks sounds like an eternity.

The teenagers? They are just ready to get their finals at school done. They are trying to pretend they don't really care about the gifts, but they do.

And the adults? They are stressing out.

That's how December works.

And in the flurry of excitement, and stress, and presents, and lights, and beautiful music... there's *something else* you can count on this time of year.

It's unavoidable really.

As Christmas approaches, something in you... starts to *ache* just a bit, doesn't it?

A lot of time, we blame it on Christmas nostalgia.

Maybe it's because you know your family is going to disappoint you again.

Or maybe it's because your life has disappointed you somehow. You wonder if you're missing out.

Or *maybe... there's no reason for it at all.*

But if you get a moment to stare at the fireplace with the Christmas lights on and Bing Crosby's voice is crooning in the background, “Do You Hear What I Hear” something aches just a bit, doesn't it?

Well, the truth is, Christmas doesn't create that longing in you. It is actually there most of the time.

Most of your life there is a yearning in you...

something unsettled...

a restlessness...

And maybe you tell yourself you're not supposed to feel this way. So you try to avoid it most of the time. Ignore it. Push it down.

Fill your schedule so you don't have to face it?

Or maybe entertain yourself to distraction?

But this time of year it's almost impossible to avoid.

It's stirred to the surface every time you hear Nat King Cole singing, "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire..."

And with every verse you hear of "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel."

That longing that you've been running from all year is stirred to the surface again. It's unavoidable.

It's simply part of the human experience...because deep in you there is a desire and longing... that is always stirring... there is a burning fire that won't be ignored for long.

In fact, human beings are so charged with desire that it's hard to ever come to simple rest, isn't it?

Ronald Rolheiser describes it really well. He says: "Desire [in us] is always stronger than satisfaction."¹

"We are not restful creatures who sometimes get restless,
fulfilled people who sometimes are dissatisfied,
serene people who sometimes experience disquiet.
Rather, we are restless people who occasionally find rest,
dissatisfied people who occasionally find fulfillment,
and disquieted people who occasionally find serenity.
We do not naturally default into rest, satisfaction, and quiet,
but into their opposite.

And why is that? Because at the center of our being lies a fiery energy"²

Human beings, we are "desiring" creatures. It's part of our very nature. Fiery longing lies in deep recesses of the soul... It's there, deep in our bones.

The Ancient Greeks, like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle ...they tried to describe it by imagining that human beings... are fired into life with a madness that comes from the gods...

and this fire makes us incurably restless for a great love...
and this fiery restlessness is what compels us "to perpetuate our seed" as they put it...
and what drives us to contemplate the divine.

But they aren't the only ones to name it.

The great spiritual teachers of Christianity like **Augustine**, and **Ignatius**, and **Teresa of Avila**... they all talk about it, too.

And our ancient biblical writers, they are often trying to help us recognize it.

Ezekiel has this vision where God takes him out into the middle of the valley to help him see the soul of God's people. And what he sees is a valley full of dried up bones. "These bones are the whole house of Israel," God says to Ezekiel.

You see, Ezekiel and the rest of Israel are sitting by the rivers of Babylon weeping over the destruction of their home, their country, their families...

and who knows?... maybe even the destruction of their faith.

¹ Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Reissue ed. (New

² Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing*, iv.

Babylon has wiped out Jerusalem. Burnt it to the ground, and carried off many of its people into exile... including Ezekiel, one of the former priests in Jerusalem.

After so much loss, the people *are numb*. They *are empty*. **“Our bones are dried up,”** they say. **“Our hope is lost.”**

So, every time they go shopping at the Babylonian grocery store and over the speakers they hear, “I’ll Be Home For Christmas” they ache.

“Not us,” they mumble under their breaths, “We are completely cut off.”

They stop imagining holiday meals around their family’s table. There is no more family table. It’s all been burnt to the ground.

The twinkle of Christmas lights there in Babylon is cold and hallow, not warm and inviting.

Their bones are dried up.

The fire of life has gone out of them.

It can happen to any of us, you know. It doesn’t have to be as dramatic as losing your home. Sometimes the fiery energy of life starts to flicker... The fire of life in you gets suffocated.

Maybe there’s just not enough oxygen to breathe in your life... You’re suffocated by all the demands of your time,

and the demands of that energy in you,

and the demands of your family...

and the demands of our world... that there’s just no oxygen left. And the fire in you begins to flicker out.

Maybe it’s because some tidal wave hit your life... an unexpected shock. A loss... and the force of all that water has completely doused any fire left in your soul.

Or maybe, some of you felt the fire in you begin to flicker out... and so you fanned the flames of desire but they got out of control, burning in places they should never go. That also happens with this longing in us.

That deep desire in you can take you places that will end up burning you and burning those you love.

You may not mean to hurt anyone... but before you know it, the restlessness, the longing within you is enflamed with the fires that destroy life rather than create it...

and the ash heap left behind, the charred relationships... looks a lot like a valley of blackened bones, doesn’t it?

It can happen so easily... when we don’t know what to do with the fiery longing in us.

And honestly, a lot of us don’t.

For most of us... we’re always wrestling with the longing.

Sometimes a flame jumps out of our mouth and scorches someone we love...

And sometimes we’re so afraid of our desires that we smother it with work, or rules, or TV...or just by withdrawing into ourselves...

All those responses – spirituality – because spirituality is what you do with that longing in you.

Next week we're going to explore how to tend the fire of our lives... what to do with the holy longings in us. If spirituality is what we do with our longing, then we need to look at how to cultivate that longing for creative energy and life. And we're going to explore that next week.

But today, Ezekiel has been taken to this valley of dried up bones... And God asks him a very important question.

A question that the longings of Christmas so often stir up in us.

A question about the vast and spacious valley within you.

"Can these bones... dried up and scattered though they may be...
can these bones live again?"

What do you think?

It is, after all, a question about your own soul.

And so, I wonder what you'd say about the bones scattered within you. Can they live?

Ezekiel? He doesn't know. And he's honest with God about that.

"O Lord God... only you know", he says.

And so, God begins to show him. The ground begins to shake. The bones start to vibrate and rattle... They start sliding across the landscape... connecting one to another... here and there...

All over the place... They start flying across the valley... and coming together... connecting bone to bone.

Then the bones begin to grow new ligaments and sinews... and flesh and skin... *[It's kind of gross if you ask me. All that fleshy ligament. It would have made me faint.]*

But finally, the bones are completely covered.

They look put together again.

But the scriptures say, there was no "breath" in them...

Remember the Hebrew word for breath is a special word... a word that means breath, wind and spirit. It's all the same word... and Ezekiel is playing with those meanings here.

There is no breath... which is to say, there is no Spirit, no fire of life in them. Sure, they now look put together... but that is not enough. And I hope you see that.

The goal for these dried up bones is not to **look** "put together" once again, **but to become alive.**

God's hope for you... God's work in you... is not for you to appear "put together," with a little bit of flesh on your bones...but for you to be made alive.

And that life... only comes from the Spirit of Life.

It is God's life breathed into your life. God's breath into your breath.

It is the fire of God's love... that is kindled in your own heart.

God's presence, God's life, God's love... is the only love large enough... beautiful enough... to fill the vast space of our deep longings. That's what Augustine in the 4th century is getting at when he writes, "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

I might tell you more about Augustine's story next week, but this week I want to tell you a bit of the story of John of the Cross, a 16th century spiritual teacher from Spain.

I've been studying John of the Cross this semester and just finished a paper about him and Teresa of Avila. Some of you have asked to read what I have been working on, so there are a few copies of my paper next to the bulletin board in the back. You're welcome to take one.

John was part of a Christian community known as the Carmelites. But just as the church is prone to do, the Carmelites were neglecting their souls' relationship with God.

So, John is recruited by Teresa of Avila to begin to reform their community and return them to their deeper spiritual roots.

And as that reform starts to take off, some of John's Carmelite peers don't like what they are seeing. They liked their lives the way it was. They were fine with the status quo.

So, they end up abducting John and imprisoning him in a dark cell with almost no daylight.

For months, he's kept there in isolation.

For months, they barely feed him.

For months, they beat him daily, trying to get him to renounce the reform.

They begin to tell him that the entire movement that he's worked so hard for has fallen apart. It's all over. They play psychological games with him.

But John's deep longing for God... won't let him recant.

It's there, in the darkness of that torment that John begins to compose his poetry... poetry that literary scholars recognize as some of the greatest in world literature, the height of Spanish poetry.

And in that poetry, he describes the soul's journey to God with the beautiful language of love's longings: "One dark night, fired by love's urgent longings..."³ his poem begins.

After nine months, he escapes and is rescued by some of his supporters. Later on, he writes about the experience of being filled with God's loving fire deep in his gut, deep in his being... the experience of deep intimacy with God.

"O living flame of love," he writes,

"that tenderly sounds my soul/in its deepest center!..."

*How gently and lovingly/you wake in my heart,/ where in secret you dwell alone;.../ how tenderly you swell my heart with love."*⁴

That flame of love is what the holy longing deep within you is stirring for. Your heart, your soul, has been struck with the wound of love... from God's own heart. And now it will not be satisfied by anything but that love.

That is why desire is always stirring in you.

And that is what your Advent longing is trying to awaken you to know.

³ John of the Cross, "The Dark Night," stz. 1.

⁴ John of the Cross, "The Living Flame," from stanza's 1 and 4.

That longing, that restlessness... It is a gift... a gift to awaken your heart to God's own love... that is coming to you.

It's a gift to help you see that the *fire of God's love can bring your dried up bones to life again...*

And so, let me invite you to pay attention to your longing desire this year.

Don't ignore it.

Don't suffocate it.

Don't try to satisfy it with things that cannot satisfy... and we'll look at that more next week.

But instead, *allow it to lead you... to guide you... to the manger... where love is flowing into the world.*

Receive that desire stirring... the way Mary received the news that God's own life was coming into her. **"Let it be"** she said.

And just as Mary's belly began to swell with new life,

God's Living Flame of Love will

"tenderly swell [your] heart with love", as John puts it.

Receive... that longing... as God's love flowing to you...

plucking the strings of your heart...

tenderly wounding your soul...

drawing you to God's own self.

That is after all, the great gift of Christmas.

God comes to us, and enters into us.

Love comes to us, in Jesus, to enflame our lives with love.

Amen.

"O living flame of love
that tenderly wounds my soul
in its deepest center...

How gently and lovingly
you wake in my heart,...
how tenderly you swell my heart with love."

~ John of the Cross "The Living Flame of Love"