

"This Old House"

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Matthew 7:24-27 and 28:16-20

May 31, 2026

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

The Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, Pastor

"This Old House" is the title of today's message, known to many of you as a home-improvement television series produced since 1979, so now in its 47th year. It originally focused on the renovation of older homes with "sweat equity" – labor in lieu of cash - contributed by the homeowners.

That show came to mind as I thought about the ministry we've done together these last two-plus years. We're in a building that dates from 1839. We are on this very corner since 1824, celebrating it in October, 2024 as *"Two hundred years in this place, united by God's grace."* There has been a Methodist Society here continuously since 1812, first under the leadership of Elijah Sherman, who was so venerable that he came to be known as "Father Sherman." The earliest Methodist service was held in 1790 by the Rev. Samuel Wigdon, under the rock on which the Masonic Temple stands. By Methodist measure if not New England, this *is* an old house!

There is, I trust, some pride in that for us. I think when an institution or a community has survived the ups and downs, the vicissitudes of societal change, community change, national change, pastoral change, governmental change...well, do you know how many Methodists it takes to change a light bulb? CHANGE?!?!? WADDYA YA MEAN, CHANGE?!?!? So if you've survived all that change, and the resistance to change, and you're still around, that's something.

Old things have their place. I should know. A sign on entering Woodbury tells you we are on the Connecticut Antiques Trail. My first Sunday here I said I saw that sign and thought, *"I'll fit right in."*

And yet we know there are churches who are so bound to a history like ours that they have become fossilized. Ministry has devolved to maintaining a building or a history instead of being devoted to service of the Living God. That's where we meet Ezekiel in today's story from the Hebrew scriptures. The Lord has led him to a valley full of dry bones. And the Lord asks him, *"Mortal, can these bones live?"*

Two years ago we might have wondered about our bones. When I received Bishop Bickerton's appointment one of my sons said to me, *"Dad, do*

you have a playbook, or are you just making it up as you go?" The answer, of course, was "Yes." Since we have agreed by your laughter that I am an antique, I have to paraphrase Farmer's Insurance, *"I know a thing or two because I've seen a thing or two."* The experience of 50 years of ministry, 48 of it ordained, was my playbook. But since nothing quite like this was in it, many of you heard me say in those early months of our ministry together, *"We're building the plane while we're flying it."* So we just made it up, didn't we? And thank God for God's guidance through it all.

"Can these bones live?" the Lord asks Ezekiel. Ezekiel, maybe out of reverence or reluctance answers, *"O Lord God, you know."* Maybe Ezekiel's answer is a *"teachable moment."* Challenges remain, do they not? To build a children's ministry for the children we pray will come; to offer a program for the teens and young adults who are already here; to sustain vibrant financial support and increase it with the arrival of a full-time pastor; to continue to build trust in the pastoral office, understandably shaken by pastoral failure: these are some of the challenges that await. God's question to Ezekiel, *"Can these bones live"* elicits Ezekiel's answer *"O Lord God, you know"* as an expression of faith that opens us to amazing possibilities. Ezekiel never had a car, but he understands that the windshield is many times bigger than the rearview mirror for a reason. We look forward, trust in the God who ***does*** know, and we do well when we listen to what God says. Sometimes it's "wait." Sometimes it's "pray." Sometimes it's "Be still, and know that I am God." Sometimes, in the words of the Rev. John Wesley, Methodism's founder, it is *"to reform the continent and spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."*

In Ezekiel's story, what God says is *"Prophecy to the bones."* That's what the Lord tells Ezekiel to do. Speak to that which seems dead or lost, in and outside ourselves. Ezekiel does. The bones come together. Then Ezekiel tells us that there are sinews on them and flesh and skin but there was no breath in them. No breath, no ***ruach*** in the Hebrew, which can also be translated "spirit." No spirit in them. The wind, the spirit, got knocked out of them.

But God wasn't done with them, you see. God tells Ezekiel *"Prophecy to the breath....and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."* That's what the Lord tells Ezekiel to do. So he does. And what happens? They lived! They stood up! And there were many of them: "a vast multitude," "a mighty army," "a great host!"

In Ezekiel's story, the dry bones were the nation of Israel, and the restoration God promised was the restoration of the nation. For us, the story is the story this congregation's renewal by the transforming power, the life-renewing, life-restoring power of God. It is lay and clergy in the best kind of partnership, being open to the new thing that God is doing in our midst, being willing to be open, being willing to try new ideas, and trusting that God will see us through. It is lay and clergy answering the call to prophesy, whether that be in an untried experiment in monthly testimony and monthly prayer; or a call to celebrate a 200th anniversary when it felt like there wasn't much to celebrate; or a decision to publicly declare that all are welcome and that "all" means "all," and to address social ills like immigration enforcement or discrimination against folks with cognitive challenges in our public "Crossroads" forums designed to stimulate positive action. It was, as one layperson said to me, lay and clergy coming along side of one another in partnership of a shared ministry. Thanks be to God!

By now there might be someone thinking, *"But wait, pastor, it wasn't all **that** bad. We weren't **that** much dried up bones."* You know what? If you're thinking that, you're absolutely right! Because, what the realtors say of desirable houses, whether old or new, is that they have "good bones." Woodbury United Methodist Church indeed has good bones! The "good bones" of "love spoken here," a slogan dating back at least over 40 years. Good bones of mission work to Africa and Latin America dating back nearly as many decades. "Good bones" of a vital music ministry that rivals that of churches five times our size. "Good bones" of Community Services Council of Woodbury and the Food Bank that we quietly and faithfully support, week after week. "Good bones" of the Transition Academy, partnering with Woodbury Public Schools to help cognitively challenged young adults learn work and social skills. "Good bones" of "Helping Hands," faithfully and quietly working on home repair projects and building the infrastructure so that when HomeFront, a regional home-repair ministry, was ready to commit 60 volunteers and comparable resources to renovate a home, we had the structure and contacts that allowed them to serve. All this emerged through faithful lay leadership, locally and in the District and Conference; and through the "good bones" of our strategic planning that emerged as VISION 2024 and VISION 2025 and its efforts in evangelism, missions, communications, congregational vitality and growth, affirmation and inclusion, and youth and young adult ministry.

And this house, this old house, this house with “good bones” is built on the rock, just as Jesus told us in today’s Gospel that it must be. We are built on the rock of Jesus Christ, Savior and Lord, redeemer of all who will cleave to him. We are built on the rock and we know it because the rain **did** fall on us and the floods **did** come to us and the winds **did** blow and beat on this house, but it did not fall. We know this Jesus, who said *“Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”* (Matthew 11:29b-30) Week after week people come here because they find that truth lived here in **your** welcome and warmth; and week after week people who **don’t** come here are blessed because we reach out beyond our walls with no expectation of *“Will this get us new members?”* or *“Will this help pay the bills?”* for these are questions that are natural to ask but are ultimately built on sand. We follow Jesus, our rock and our redeemer.

Which leads us to his final words to the disciples in Matthew’s Gospel: make disciples. Make disciples of all nations. Disciple: the word means “learner.” If you were here two weeks ago you heard the depth and breadth of our Christian Education program, into which new life has been breathed with outstanding lay leadership. So make learners. Make followers. Be the Bible you want people to read. Be the change you want to see in the world. If you came here weary today that may sound like a burden. It’s not, or at least not totally. Remember that business about my yoke is easy and my burden is light? It is a promise, but it does stretch us, doesn’t it? In that sense, it isn’t easy. If it was, everyone would do it.

But for those who stretch, who reach out in faith, who trust the Living God, who receive the breath of the Spirit, who follow this Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, who follow the Lord of Love: well, what we find is a new vigor and a life of meaning and purpose. It’s contagious, this Good News! It’s joyful, this Good News! It’s why some of you are emboldened to invite others here: to sense what God is up to, what God is doing, what surprises God yet has in store for “the people called Methodist” in Woodbury, Connecticut.

But most of all, it is being a part of a vision bigger than ourselves, bigger than our history, bigger than “this old house.” It is God’s vision, who never gives up and never gives out and never gives in and expects the same of us. It is God’s vision, of love and truth and justice and compassion and mercy. It is Zion, the beautiful city of God. And we are marching there! May it be so! Let’s sing it! Amen.