



## THE MOTHER EMANUEL NINE

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### OPENING OUR GRAVES

*By: The Reverend Jennifer Leath, Ph.D.*

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup>He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” <sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.” <sup>7</sup>So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup>I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. <sup>11</sup>Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ <sup>12</sup>**Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.** <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD. *Ezekiel 37:1-14*

### THE BONES OF THOSE WE LOVE ARE VERY DRY

On 9 April 1816, sixteen delegates gathered in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania at Bethel Church under the leadership of Richard Allen. At that meeting they united to become the denomination we now

know as the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Later in that same year, churches from Charleston, South Carolina under the leadership of Morris Brown traveled north to meet with Richard Allen; at that meeting, these churches from South Carolina united with the fledgling African Methodist Episcopal Church. Forty-seven years before the Emancipation Proclamation that, in theory, freed enslaved people of African descent in the United States, Allen and Brown were establishing a social and spiritual institution that could combat the sin of racism and the insidious attempts to destroy Black personhood, Black community, and Black family. Along with Sarah Allen, the very dry bones of Richard Allen and Morris Brown rest at Mother Bethel.

## **THE BONES OF THOSE WE LOVE ARE DRYING**

Two hundred years later, we gather exactly one year after nine members of Brown's church, Emanuel AME Church of Charleston, SC, were brutally massacred in the church at a bible study gathering. While we yet struggle to lament and evaluate the reason and meaning of this terror, we recognize the courageous leadership of the Honorable Rev. Clementa C. Pinckney, the slain pastor of Mother Emanuel and know that for his and his congregation's refusal to submit to oppression and discrimination, he became a target for violence of the vilest kind. Along with eight others, the drying bones of Clemanta Pinckney rest in South Carolina.

The hand of the LORD comes upon us, and brings us out by the spirit of the LORD and sets us down in the middle of valleys full of bones. God leads us all around them; there are very many lying in the valley, and they are very dry. God says to us, "AME Church, can these bones live?" As we continue to lament the massacre at Mother Emanuel, we answer together as did Ezekiel: "O Lord GOD, you know." Our minds, bodies, and souls are yet crushed, numbed, and hardened under the force of this terror. Yet, God asks if we believe that God can take our stony hearts and soften them into flesh again, that God can take our very dry and drying bones and breathe life and purpose into them again. We are asked not only to dwell in the valley of the graves of our fallen brothers and sisters, but we are asked to allow those graves to be opened.

As we continue to mourn those slain, let us remember that God has already shown that God can bring the very dry and drying bones together again, cover them with flesh, endow them with spirit, and empower them with physical strength. Even as God heals our wound, allow God to open the graves of our beloveds.

And, let us never forget the completion of this prophetic word to Ezekiel that we – those living – are part of God's promise. We, though tempted to forget or join the valleys of dry bones, God tells us through God's words to the people of Israel: "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people" (*Ezekiel 37:12*). Though all around our souls give way, allow God to be our hope and stay.

Walk on, sisters and brothers, to freedom land – fighting discrimination and oppression in the name of the God who cares so much for the least among us that our God is even willing to breathe full life back into the very dry bones of the disinherited. Such Divine breath is for our arrival at our “own soil” (*Ezekiel 37:14*). When we catch this second wind, may we walk to the soil that has been promised, the soil that is fertile for the trees of healing, justice, and peace of all nations and peoples.

### **LET US PRAY . . .**

The very dry and drying bones of those we worshipped with, prayed with, worked with, and loved You with are painful for us to even consider. Our tears could refill the oceans; the dried out heaviness of our hearts could sink our bodies in those same oceans. Have mercy, O Lord God.

Breath of Life, thank you for opening our graves. Thank you for commanding Ezekiel to prophesy life to our very dry bones for the sake of our salvation and deliverance. God, please command us again that we may prophesy, that our graves may be opened for Your glory and honor, for Your justice and peace. *Amen.*