

Can These Bones Live?

It sounds as if, at some point in his life, Ezekiel had come across the site of a ferocious battle. Perhaps it was at Megiddo, where King Josiah of Judah had been defeated by the Egyptians in a famous battle that gives us our word Armageddon. Perhaps, given the efficiency of carrion-eaters, the battle had been more recent; perhaps even the revolt against the Babylonians led by Zedekiah that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Perhaps it had been an older battle; Israel and Judah had been defeated by their enemies many, many times since the days of David and Solomon. There had been ample opportunities for a valley to be filled with the bones of fallen soldiers from among the Children of Israel.

Did Ezekiel see such a sight on his way from Jerusalem, where he had been a priest, to his own exile in Babylon, where he became a prophet? Was he allowed, perhaps even forced, to pause, to take in the horror of the carnage that must have been wrought in that place? Was he, a priest of Yahweh, purposefully marched through this charnel house of a valley by his enemies in order to render him ritually unclean, to add the final insult to the devastating injuries of seeing his nation destroyed, his wife killed, the Temple of the Lord burned to the ground? Was it then, in his grief and misery, when God gave him the vision of the nation restored or was it later, as he struggled to bring a word of consolation and hope to the exiled community in Babylon?

We will never know the answers to these questions but we can understand the emotional impact of the valley of dry bones all too well. We may not have trod the site of battle, where bones remain unburied, but we have seen the electronic visions of Kandahar and Baghdad, of Darfur and Srebrenica, of Pol Pot's killing fields and of Hitler's "final solution." In the past two weeks, we have followed the stories of recovery teams as they searched, not for dry bones but for the bodies of the recently killed to the north of us in Oso. This was brought home to me in a vivid way on Friday when Lynnwood's interim fire chief, Tod Gates, and his colleague, assistant chief Gregg Sieloff, told a gathering of city department heads and council members about the obstacles they'd had to overcome as the commanders of the incident team made up of firefighters and volunteers from across the area. If you live in Lynnwood, by the way, you can take real pride in the bravery, acumen and compassion of those men whom your taxes pay to serve and protect. Less dramatically but closer to home, we have seen the dry bones of people's lives in shuttered storefronts and foreclosed homes. We know the dry bones of relationships shattered by addiction and infidelity, the dry bones of a nation in which red will not speak to blue and where the rainbow is seen as a symbol of political division rather than as a symbol of God's love for all, the dry bones of families of faith where bitter dispute over doctrine and practice have replaced lovingly bearing each other's burdens. All of us know once bustling houses of faith where the pews are now mostly inhabited by the shadows and whispers of the past. Dry bones, indeed. No, we do not need to have the experience of Ezekiel to understand that there are dry bones all around us and even in us.

Are we ourselves dry bones? If we are honest, I think the answer must be yes, at least some of the time. We have all known times of spiritual aridity, times when our hearts and souls as well as our bones, feel to us as dry as dust. Sometimes it seems as though God is a long way away. Sometimes it seems like years since we felt God's presence in our lives or that we've never truly felt the touch of God. Sometimes, all we need do is examine our own lives to understand the Valley of Dry Bones.

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The Bible, which is at the very least an accurate collection of the yearnings of human beings across the ages, has many stories and passages which reflect the sense of inner death and despair which Ezekiel relates in this odd tale. In the vision of the dry bones, Ezekiel is giving voice to an embodiment of the grief he hears from his fellow exiles, "They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'" Our psalm for the morning is often known by the first two words of its Latin translation, "De Profundis," "Out of the depths..." The human experience captured in this short psalm is so universal and so eloquently expressed by the Hebrew author that there is very little variation in translations. In each, the despair of the speaker is conveyed with the image of being trapped deep below the ground, perhaps in the grave. In many of the translations of verse two, it is explicitly stated that the cry of the supplicant is for God's mercy. I think the freedom taken in translating verse six by Pamela Greenberg, the modern American poet and Hebrew scholar whose translations of the Psalms we've been using in worship for the past several weeks, captures the intensity of yearning suggested by the simple repetition of the original language: "My soul longs for (God) more than the watchman at the gate longs for morning, more than the tired watchman at the gate longs for the first flicker of dawn." Anyone who has ever spent a sleepless night, wrestling with conscience or fear or great trouble, knows that longing for the dawn, when surely things will look brighter, figuratively as well as literally.

That sense of grief, of despair and of hoping against hope for deliverance is also one of the many threads in the story of Jesus and the death of his friend, Lazarus. Because of its length, I've chosen not to read it whole this morning although we did so in Sunday School. Listen, though, to the way in which the author of the Gospel According to John captures the grief of the situation: "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' ... When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.'" When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep."

There is a profound message to us in all this acknowledgement of grief and longing in the Scriptures. One part of the Good News which is revealed to us in the Bible is that we are not alone in times of trouble. Throughout the history of God's people we find stories and songs that tell us that others have been there before us and have come out the other side. Even when we are down in the depths, the Bible says, God is there with us and hears our cry, our pleadings for mercy. God's prophet, Ezekiel, was confronted with the evidence of a battle in which the flower of Israel was cut down. Jesus himself was grief-stricken over the death of a friend and needed to provide comfort for the sisters of the man who had died. No matter what loss and despair we must face in life, others have had to face it, too. And, in Jesus, God has had to face it, too. Through Emmanuel, "God With Us," human grief and anguish has entered into the life of God.

And at times, for some, that lesson of God's solidarity with us and with the people of God across time is enough. Some might say, that is the perfect wisdom for Lent, this time of reflection and repentance as we look ahead in the calendar to the suffering and death of Christ, as we prepare our hearts and minds to participate in the sorrow of Good Friday and the realization that we, just like the first disciples, have at times in our lives abandoned the Crucified One.

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But today, I say that is not enough. Knowing that the Creator of All stands with us in the darkness is comfort but it is not the last word. Jesus grieved with his friends and went on to suffer and die himself but truly I tell you on the third day God raised him up. He was beaten and he was mocked and he was tortured and he died and they buried him but through the power of God on the morning of the first day of the week, he got up. And all of our practice, in Advent, in Epiphany, in Lent, in Pentecost, all of it, is truly about preparing our hearts not for sorrow but for joy. For resurrection! And all of these stories this morning are resurrection stories.

For the psalmist, resurrection (or at least redemption) is assumed. Why cry from the depths if there is no hope of an answer and of rescue? Pamela Greenberg's translation states it flatly: "...with you is forgiveness... Let the people put their hope in God, for with you is a storehouse of kindness, and with the Holy One redemption abounds. You *will* redeem the world from all its guilt and confusion and sin." From Ezekiel, we hear the promise of God from Yahweh's word: "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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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."

In Jesus, that promise of resurrection is indeed fulfilled, for the Crucified One, for his dear friend Lazarus and for all who will accept the gift of life. "Jesus said to (Martha), "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." And then he proceeded to prove it. He raised Lazarus, restored him to life and to community and, hear the Good News, he will do the same for us if we trust that the gift of God is for us as well.

This is the hard part for many. We come to believe sometimes that we are too far gone even for God to help. We think that somehow we are too wicked or too far from God or just too dead in our spirits for God to raise us up. We say to ourselves, sometimes, "Well, sure Lazarus had been dead for four days but my spirit has been dead for years. I'm too far gone." But we forget about those dry bones. Ezekiel says that they were very dry. But when he trusted in God, "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them... and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." Dem bones got up and walked around! Now, hear the word of the Lord! We have committed ourselves to a rekindling here at Good Shepherd Baptist Church but deep within us we may be harboring a despair that all we have left is cold, dead ashes, too far gone to catch a spark of life. But God's word to us is, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

I think this is connected to what Paul is writing about in the passage from Romans we heard earlier. The promise of resurrection is extended to us. Because we have chosen the Way of Jesus as our way of living in the world, like him we are open to the life-giving power of God even in those places in our life that have been touched by death. If we focus on the power of dominant culture, the domination system or what Paul calls "the flesh," then we remain bound to

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it and the result is a spiritual death. But if we open ourselves to God's spirit, to the spirit of life and love and peace, then our spirits will live, both in this world and the next.

My friend, Rev. Paul Mitchell, the pastor of Snoqualmie United Methodist Church, pointed out some interesting things to me and some other friends about the Lazarus story. As the eleventh chapter, it is the very middle of John's Gospel, and the very middle verse of the Lazarus story, verse 23 of 45, is "Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again.'" Now chapters and verses, as we know, are a much later addition to the books of the Bible but it is nevertheless true that the Lazarus story occurs as a sort of central peak to John and Jesus' promise as a central peak to the story. Why, literarily, would this be true? Scholars believe that John was written to a church in peril, facing concerted persecution from the Romans and lacking the first generation of leadership, all of whom had succumbed to age or martyrdom. This reminder of the life-giving power of God in the face of apparent destruction came to God's people "in the depths," just as the vision of the valley of the bones came to Ezekiel as he was ministering to God's people "in the depths," during the days of the Babylonian captivity. Whatever we, as individuals or as the gathered Body of Christ in this place called Good Shepherd Baptist Church, are facing, it surely cannot be any more frightening than persecution and exile.

The Scriptures tell us that Jesus left us with a powerful symbol of the resurrection and the new life to come, of the Wedding Banquet which is itself an expression of life within the love of God. We call it the Lord's Supper or Communion and we remember that Jesus told us to think of him whenever we sat together and ate bread and drank the fruit of the vine. "This is my body," he said and in symbolically taking him into ourselves, we remember how he was broken, broken for us in ways we still sometimes struggle to understand. "This is my blood," he said and we must understand that by that he meant that we are to take his life into ours because blood is and was the most powerful symbol of life. His enemies killed him the next day but on Easter he arose, just as we will someday be resurrected, just as he is symbolically resurrected every day – for every morning is Easter morning, even in Lent, as long as we show forth the resurrection life of Jesus in our own lives. Mortals, can these bones live? Can the bones of relationships be restored and the bones of community be renewed? Can our dried-out souls arise, rekindled, today and the resurrected bones of our bodies arise in the future? Of course they can, for our God is the God of life and of resurrection and of peace and of love. For the resurrection of Jesus our Lord, and for the resurrection of our spirits today and for the resurrection of the life to come, thanks be to God.