

Can These Bones Live?

Text: Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 23, 2021

The books of Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel follow one after the other in the Bible and focus on the same set of events—the crisis that reshaped both Israel as a nation and Judaism as a religion—the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the exile of its people to Babylon for the next 70 years. Jeremiah was the prophet in the court of the king before the Babylonian army showed up. Jeremiah’s message from God to the king was actually to surrender to Babylon and avoid the tragic consequences of war.

Telling the king that God wanted him to surrender to foreign invaders got Jeremiah thrown in a cistern; and the king found other prophets whose messages he liked better. When Babylon finally did breach the gates, the Babylonians killed the king’s sons in front of him before blinding him and taking him to Babylon in chains. But they treated Jeremiah well and gave him the choice of going to Babylon with the others or staying in the land. Jeremiah decided to stay and later ended up in Egypt. We looked at Jeremiah’s anguished cries for his city in the book of Lamentations last week.

This week we get a different take on the same circumstances from Ezekiel, who was

a priest in the temple of Jerusalem in the period just before its destruction. Ezekiel did not get Jeremiah’s options and was taken into exile just like everyone else. Without a temple in which to serve, Ezekiel morphs from priest to prophet in Babylon as God calls on him to bring comfort to the exiles, who established a colony in one section of the city.

It’s that context—depression, PTSD, war, a crisis of faith, and a loss of home—that helps us understand the power of Ezekiel’s vision of a valley of dry bones. Unlike many visions in the Bible, this wasn’t a vision of multi-headed beasts or something else outside of human experience. When Ezekiel saw that Valley of Dry Bones, he had no doubt seen valleys of fresh bones—bones of those he personally knew and loved—and in that he was not alone. The Israelites may well have been forced to march through such mass graves on their way to Babylon. Surely after years of war they surrounded the city.

If you have ever stood at a place of mass death—Gettysburg; Auschwitz; the mass grave just outside Moscow that contains more than 20,000 of Josef Stalin’s victims; or these days just a simple school like Columbine, Sandy Hook, or Parkland—it’s an overwhelming feeling. If it’s a mass grave of your own ancestors, you feel it more strongly still. And if it is recent enough that you actually knew those bodies in life, there simply are not words.

In chapter 37, God transports Ezekiel to such a place—a mass grave of his people after he has just witnessed the horrors of the battle and siege. But it’s a time in the future. The bones are no longer fresh, they could be anyone or everyone. They are dry. And in this place of desolation, grief, and depression, God says to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Hold that thought and fast-forward about 500 years.

The question facing Ezekiel is much like the question swirling in the minds of the disciples in the days and weeks after Jesus’ death. The initial grief of his execution had given way to the joy of resurrection, but that joy was dampened a bit when they learned that Jesus wasn’t going to be

sticking around. Up he goes into the heavens at his ascension and, while he promised to return, there was still the question of...so...what exactly do we do now? Jesus had left them with the Great Commission—to go into all the world and preach the gospel. But that’s a tall order for a small group of people with little in the way of financial resources and sitting on the wrong side of the political powers of the day.

It wasn’t so much a question of what to do as it was how to do it. Could the bones of this Jesus movement live? Could there be new life for the drying bones of what had been a vibrant new approach to faith? Jesus had told them to stay in Jerusalem until they got the resources they would need. But it had been 50 days now. Was anything really going to happen? People would give up soon and go back to their old lives. Maybe it was just a dream. Maybe we misunderstood. Maybe we wanted to believe too badly and none of it is real. *His* bones could live, sure. But us? Can *these* bones live? Now fast forward another 2,000 years.

The question of Ezekiel and of Jesus’ disciples is also similar to our questions here. As with Ezekiel, all too many of us have seen the horrors of war. Just over the past year we have seen images of refrigerator trucks and new mass graves in New York and elsewhere when the pandemic was at its peak and morgues and cemeteries were overrun. That’s still happening in other parts of the world right this minute. Racially-motivated violence leaves innocent black, brown, Indigenous, and Asian bodies in our streets with little accountability for those who stole their lives. Can these bones live?

And it’s not just physical death. Two-thirds of those filing for bankruptcy in the United States cite medical bills and related issues as key factors—even for those with health insurance. Our national institutions are literally under siege. Foreign state actors corrupt and infect our trust in sources of information and our ability to govern ourselves. We need each other more than ever, and yet our attempts at finding solutions collapse into rage and division. Families are split as they have not been since brother fought brother in the Civil War. Can these bones live?

When God asked Ezekiel that question as they looked together over that valley of death and despair, Ezekiel merely answered, as we might, “O Lord God, you know.” In other words, “What are you asking me for? I have no answers for this tragedy, this pain, this seemingly unending pit of despair. You’re the divine power here. You tell **me**, if these bones can live!”

God has a purpose in giving this vision to Ezekiel and for trying to get Ezekiel to answer the question instead of just playing a film reel of a passive vision. Remember Ezekiel was a priest that God called to be a prophet. The main job of a prophet is to help people hear and understand messages from God, so when Ezekiel answers the question with a depressed, “O Lord God, you know,” his ability to carry God’s word to the people is in jeopardy. All of Israel felt that way and they needed someone to give them hope and get them through the years ahead. A depressed prophet was not going to cut it. So, God decides to give Ezekiel a vision of hope that would spill over to the people and resurrect the dry bones of his nation.

Remember from last week that hope comes from realizing that there is always something we can actually do to move toward our desired outcome. To give Ezekiel actual hope rather than just a promise, God gives him a job. God says to Ezekiel, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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.” Ezekiel had to call for it; to actually say it aloud.

Ezekiel does just that, and the scene begins to unfold. He tells us: “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.” Hope is beginning to return to Ezekiel, but it’s still not in full force. He continues, “But there was no breath in them.” Breath...

Ezekiel is stuck. All the makings of biological life lie there before him in the vision. The bones are connected, the tissue is formed, even the skin is intact, much as Adam was when God crafted him from the red earth of Genesis 2. But just like with Adam, something was still missing. Adam was not yet alive and neither were those in the valley. They still lacked the breath, the wind, the spirit of God—the *ruach*, which is the Hebrew word that means all three.

So God instructs Ezekiel further: “Prophesy to the breath, ...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.”

I imagine Ezekiel lifting his head, finding his own *ruach*—the breath that once animated his service as a priest in the Temple—as he looks out over the valley. At first all he had seen were dry bones. But now he sees entire bodies, maybe the shapes of those he once knew, lying as they must have when first they fell—so close to life and yet so far. Ezekiel breathes deeply and prophesied as he was commanded, “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live!” And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. And God promised to take them home.

Now hang onto that and jump to the book of Acts. “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”

The particulars are different, but at its heart, it’s the same story. Alive, resurrected, restored, renewed, empowered, filled. Ready. Ready to meet any challenge this new life would bring, because the spirit, the wind, the breath of God had filled them.

In some ways the Bible would be complete if it only had this one story from a war-ravaged priest having a vision of a mass grave. The only message we need is that the God we proclaim is the God who is the source of all breath; and there is no valley so dry that God’s Spirit can’t blow through it and bring new life. The Kingdom of God is within you—in the breath, in the spirit that makes you not just living but alive. There is no tomb that can extinguish the breath, the wind will blow away the stone, not by might, not by power, but by my Spirit says the Lord of hosts. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.

There is no need to wait for the second coming of Jesus; the life promised on Easter is already here, we need only to fill our lungs and stand to our feet. Right here in the midst of death and despair, grief and loss, anxiety and pain, we are told by God to call for the wind that will blow away the dust and reveal the truth: Because Jesus lives, we too shall live—not just in some heavenly mansion, but here. Now.

Can these bones live? Can the church survive? Can I get through this week? This day? Can we meet the challenges we face? Can we bear to look at the valley full of our dry bones? Can we ever overcome our divisions and come back together as a people? In Ezekiel and in that Upper Room in Jerusalem we have the answer. "Come from the four winds, O breath," Come, Holy Spirit, mighty wind, and help us learn to speak in other tongues. The God of life has promised our return and restoration.

There is much in our world that requires our strong and urgent action. We need courage and wisdom and power. But with only our connected bones, sinews, and skin we will fail. This vast multitude only stands at the ready when we open ourselves to the wind and call upon the breath. "Come from the four winds, O breath!" "Come, Holy Spirit! *Veni sancte spiritus...*