

HEROES OF THE FAITH
EZEKIEL: THE PROBLEM OF DRY BONES
Ezekiel 37:1-10

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On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached about daughters prophesying, young men seeing visions, and old men dreaming dreams. The Church was born not on what was, but what can be when the Holy Spirit fills the hearts of the faithful. Maybe it is still true that dreams and visions more than facts and functions shape the future of our faith.

One of the most visionary prophets of the Old Testament was a priest named Ezekiel. He lived about 2,600 years ago. He witnessed the terrible siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in which Jerusalem fell in 587 B.C. He spent years in exile, along with other Jewish leaders, in what is now modern day Iraq. There the hand of the Lord was upon him to proclaim hope in a time of hopelessness. Ezekiel's most remembered vision is the one before us today. It is the vision of the dry bones. You know about "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones." Even if you are totally oblivious to the Bible, you know the story. As Paul Harvey would say: here is the rest of the story!

THE VALLEY IS REAL

This vision was the third major vision of Ezekiel, a vision of hope for people in the valley of despair. Verses 1-3—*The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O sovereign Lord, you alone know."* — The valleys are real.

In the 13-year war between King Zedekiah and King Nebuchadnezzar, one-third of Judah's population starved to death, one-third were killed in battle, and one-third were carried off to Babylonian captivity. The valley of Judah contained the decayed bones of slain victims denied the dignity of a decent burial, their flesh picked clean by the birds of the air. This vision of Ezekiel was more than a figment of his imagination. He had caught a glimpse of them as he was carried away from his home town. There were a great many bones and they were very dry. — The valleys are real. The bones are many.

One of my plans this summer is to visit the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. I have seen the one in Jerusalem. It is almost more than one can bear to remember. Yet, the world must never forget that within many of our life times, six million Jews, two-thirds of Europe's Jewish population, were massacred, many without even bones to be remembered. — The valleys are real.

Shall I go on to talk about the school rooms in Rwanda where 40,000 people were murdered in six hours one spring day back in 1994? Or dare we bear in mind the mass graves now exposed in Iraq, the result of Saddam Hussein's ravage rampages, interestingly enough in the very same territory where Ezekiel had this vision. — The valleys are real.

More important for us today, gathered in the comfort of this Sanctuary, the valleys are real for you and me.

The cancer is relentless.

The marriage is dead.

The job is pointless.

The grief is deep.

The days are difficult.

The nights are long.

And we respond much like Ezekiel did, 'O Lord, can these bones live?' And Ezekiel's response was 'I don't know. Only you know, Lord; it's in your hands. I don't know if there is any life left in these bones, any hope remaining in this valley. If there is any hope in the midst of the valley of dry bones, Lord, it's in your hands.' It's all too much for our small minds to comprehend. The valleys are real.

ORGANIZATION IS HELPFUL

But it's in a valley that this prophet is called to prophesy. Verse 4—*Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!"* Verse 7—*So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them and flesh had come upon them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.* There comes some order in this dry place. Organization is taking place.

Maybe only a minister would pose this question but I am curious about the content of Ezekiel's sermon. What do you think Ezekiel said in the valley of the dry bones when called to prophesy and to preach? Have you ever thought about that?

Ezekiel could have done the Methodist "thing". He could have called a meeting of the bones. They could have gotten together to reminisce about the days when they were lively. Maybe the Jawbones especially liked chewing on such nostalgia.

I've pastored some churches that had more people in the cemetery than they had in the Sanctuary. Much to my dismay, I discovered preaching to the dead is not all bad. The dead were there every Sunday. The dead didn't complain about my preaching. The dead didn't require a lot of attention—just a flower now and then. We Methodists obviously enjoy ministering to the dead—why else would we hold on to so many dead churches?

Ezekiel could have taken the consultant approach. Now all you introverted bones get together over there. All you extroverted bones assemble over here. You feeling bones, if there are any left in this group, huddle here close to me. And you reasoning bones get your heads together up yonder. Maybe through the group process these bones found ways to work together—you know, the head bone connected to the neck bone, neck bone connected to the shoulder bone, — look at the way these bones are united.

Maybe Ezekiel did it more directly. Maybe he just said, “Thus saith the word of the Lord, ‘Get together.’” Like a prophet with authority, a priest with responsibility, ‘Now you hip bones join up with those leg bones, and you leg bones fit in with these foot bones — we got work to do here. Move it!’

Here’s the point. Ezekiel did what he could, used what he had. He had enough faith, enough hope, enough love, and enough courage to preach in the most unlikely place of all the earth and to proclaim hope when all hope was gone. Do we?

LIFE IS ESSENTIAL

Verse 9—Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘this is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” Verse 10—So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet — a vast army.

Let me tell you a secret. The word for wind, the word for breath, and the word for Spirit in the Bible is all one word. It’s ruach in the Old Testament, pneuma in the New Testament. So when Jesus talks to Nicodemus about being born of the Spirit, he refers to the wind. The Spirit is blowing in the wind.

I know, we ask meteorologists to predict the wind, physicians to help us breathe, and theologians to send us the Spirit. The Bible makes no such divisions. The same Spirit that caused Adam to be a living being is the Holy Spirit that comes with wind and fire at Pentecost to give believers new life.

I talk with a fair number of people who have lost contact with God. I understand that. They come to see me about it and I’m glad they do. To some degree I understand. When I was chronically ill, I found it hard to pray. But God is closer than we think.

When you think you’ve lost God, this is what I want to say. Breathe. You have to anyway. Take a breath. Take a deep breath. God is closer than the air we breathe.

I was in the grocery store the other day when I watched a two-year-old throw a

temper tantrum. Something between the Cheerios and the Frosted Flakes made him unhappy. He screamed to the top of his voice. When that didn't work, he decided to stop breathing. His face turned red. His lips turned blue. I wondered what to do. His mom, however, seemed unconcerned. She knew he would eventually breathe — and he did. I've thrown my fair share of temper tantrums with God — decided in anger or grief to stop breathing spiritually. When God didn't respond with a siren and paramedics, I concluded He was not there. But like that mother, He is there all the time. He said, you'll breathe again at the right time, in the right way. God is closer than the air we breathe.

Here's something else about breath. Most of us use only about 20–30% of our lung capacity. We are shallow breathers. We breathe on the surface, not from the depths of our being. That's why we are short of breath so much. The same is true spiritually. We dabble around on the surface. A real spiritual person is a person who knows how to breathe. Breathe on me breath of God.

The philosopher Kierkegaard used to pray it this way: “Teach me, O God, not to torture myself, not to make a martyr of myself through stifling reflection, but rather teach me to breathe deeply in faith.”

Breathe on me, Breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
That I may love what thou dost love,
And do what thou wouldst do.

Breathe into God. Amen.