

THE BIBLE LESSON..... Ezekiel 37:1-14, RSV

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones.

²And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry. ³And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, thou knowest." ⁴Again he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶And I will lay sinews upon 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."

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, 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." ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.

¹¹Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.' ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, says the LORD."

SERMON

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

These are strange and unnerving times! I was supposed to preach a sermon at Immanuel, and instead I am writing to you from my own house of quarantine in Briarcliff Manor. I am grateful that friends and family are healthy, and I pray that you are, too, but I miss being out and about, I miss gathering with others, and I will surely miss worshipping together. I bet you feel the same. It is not quite exile in Babylon, but I certainly feel a new sympathy for folks who have been cut off (even temporarily) from the people and places they love.

It brings me joy and consolation, however, to think of us all coming together in spirit at the appointed time to pray and read God's Word. Our scripture passage for today, the Valley of the Dry Bones, is always read at the Easter Vigil. When I read this passage to myself, I hear Davida Goldman's sonorous voice echoing through the sanctuary, crisply enunciating every syllable. It is one of the things I most look forward to every Easter. Almost always, though, when I hear this passage, something else pops into my head. It goes like this. "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, now hear de word of de Lord!" Once that catchy old tune worms its way into my brain, it is there to stay, and I start picturing an old cartoon my children used to watch that was set to this song, in which cheerful animated skeletons come to life before your eyes and dance around. It was pretty adorable.

It's a memorable song, and I have no quarrel with setting biblical stories to music, but as I reflected on my own associations with this text, it dawned on me that this is a Bible story that we have domesticated and tamed to such an extent that it is easy to miss the stark urgency of its message. Part of the problem is that we almost always treat the story as a stand-alone passage and ignore the thirty-six chapters that come before it and the ten that come after it. Ezekiel is surely one of the more peculiar books of the Bible; like Daniel and the Book of Revelation, it is full of fantastic imagery, vivid allegory, and the ever-present threat of doom and destruction. The prophet Ezekiel is called to warn people that they must wake up, pay attention, repent, and turn to the Lord, and it seems as though the Lord would have him use any means necessary to get that message across. The vision reported in today's reading is widely understood by the Church to prefigure resurrection and eternal life, and so it does, as we shall see, but we miss a lot of the story's power when we

jump straight to the happy ending and don't put in the hard and frequently painful work of giving ear to the message of Ezekiel's ministry as a whole.

The scene that Ezekiel sets in this 37th chapter is eerie, it is strange, it is downright apocalyptic. If we were to aim to produce a realistic film version of the book of Ezekiel, including this episode, I do not think it would be appropriate for children! The Lord sets Ezekiel down in the midst of a valley piled with human remains. Unburied. This alone must have scandalized Ezekiel the priest, reared in the tradition of Levitical purity codes which prescribed strict rules about handling corpses, although by this point in his ministry, perhaps nothing shocks him anymore. God has commanded him to perform a series of ever more bizarre sign-acts to get the attention of the people. Now here are these bones, so dry as to perhaps be crumbling into dust, and the Lord orders Ezekiel to speak to them, to prophesy over them!

Ezekiel cleverly dodges the Lord's demanding query, "Can these bones live?" by turning the question back on God; "Oh Lord God, you know." But he might be thinking to himself, I may as well prophesy to dead bones for all the heed any living people have paid me! For that has been Ezekiel's lot as a prophet, to preach to an "impudent and stubborn people," a "rebellious house," upon whose deaf ears Ezekiel's words have fallen in vain.

Ezekiel, you see, was commissioned by God to preach to Jews in exile in Babylon. Sometime in the 6th century B.C., the Babylonian army, under the leadership of the ruthless Nebuchadnezzar, descended upon the little country of Judah and conquered it. Part of the Babylonian strategy to maintain dominance and enrich its own empire was to divide up the people it conquered. A sizable group of captives from Judah were deported to the capital city, Babylon; many of these captives were elites, including artisans, court officials, and priests, like Ezekiel.

This was a clever strategy on the part of the Babylonians, for not only did they weaken their enemy, Judah, by draining the land of its leading citizens, by integrating these exiles into their own society, they made themselves stronger. This put the exiles in a strange position, however. On the one hand, the prophets, like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, told them that their lamentable captivity was a punishment for their unfaithfulness and rebellion towards the God of Israel. On the other hand, they lived well in Babylon. Many prospered, and the temptation to grow complacent and forgetful in their contentment

was ever present. They teetered between this complacency and their despair at ever seeing their homeland again. Meanwhile, there were endless rumors of troubles back in Judah and its capital, Jerusalem. The kings of Judah were not cooperative and began to rebel, Nebuchadnezzar was losing his patience, and soon, the unthinkable would happen, Jerusalem herself would be destroyed.

If you can imagine this milieu into which Ezekiel was called to prophesy, I bet it will seem uncomfortably familiar to you. The Bible and the New York Times remind us that there is nothing new under the sun. Calamity, oppression, plagues – alas, these are the normal state of affairs of human history. We have much in common with those poor exiles in Babylon, yearning for a word of hope but instead enduring never-ending cycles of political unrest and war and rumors of war. We can sympathize with their awful, sinking sensation that life as they knew it would never be the same. Ezekiel had to preach to a people who were both terrified and stubbornly clinging to every vestige of normalcy, even if that meant putting their heads in the sand and pretending they couldn't understand Ezekiel's warnings. They refused to repent of their sins, they refused to give up their idolatry, they refused to acknowledge the gravity of their situation. True, they had followed Ezekiel's career with curiosity; they gathered to watch him as he acted out strange parables for their benefit, and they listened as he relayed shocking allegories about the abominations of Jerusalem and the wrath of the Lord. But in the end they regarded Ezekiel as nothing more than an entertainer. Of Ezekiel it was said, "Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has a pleasant voice and can play on an instrument; for they hear your words, *but they do not do them!*" (Ezekiel 32:33)

It really should not have surprised Ezekiel, after all that, to have been commanded to prophesy to a heap of bones, to skeletons without ears to hear. For that is what he has been doing all along. These bones are the whole house of Israel, crying, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off." That lament hits shockingly close to home, doesn't it? Are we not sometimes so discouraged and fearful, so mired in sinful habits and ways of thinking, so determined to hear only what we want to hear, that we can identify with the people of Israel, longing for a word from the Lord and at the same time trying our best to hide from him so that we cannot hear him calling? Do we not also often alternate between the delusion that we do not

need God and the despairing fear that he will honor that delusion and have nothing more to do with us?

If so, then this strange story of skeletons in the desert should make us sing with joy! Because the good news is that when God speaks his Word to these bones and breathes his Spirit on them, there is no pretending that these were self-made, self-sufficient men and women who had all the answers and did all the right things. They were utterly dependent, utterly powerless, utterly dead. But just as he did with the first Adam, God raises them from the earth and gives them life.

The Reformers liked to refer to God's "mighty, efficacious Word," and what better display of that Word in action than here, in this desolate valley, when God resurrects a people deader than dead, lays sinew and flesh upon them, and promises them the whole land of Israel? But it is not only land which he has promised, but new selves! Through Ezekiel, God has also promised:

²⁶ A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezekiel 36:26-27, NRSV)

God's mighty and efficacious Word raises the dead, restores the sinner, and penetrates even the deaf ear and the stone heart. The rebellious and idolatrous people of Judah were no more receptive to God's Word than a heap of bones, and yet that Word prevails and it is the final Word. The good news in this story is not just that it foreshadows the resurrection of the body or the restoration of Israel; it points to the promise of new creation and the triumph of God's Word in the person of Jesus Christ.

It is fitting, I think, that this story comes in the very middle of our Easter Vigil readings. It links the creation story in Genesis to the resurrection, the new creation story, of the Gospels. It is as though there is a red arrow pointing to this valley with a sign that says, "you are here." We are the exiles in Babylon, and we are the skeletons arising out of the dust. In the Gospel of John, in the 20th chapter, the risen Jesus appears to his disciples, breathes on them and says to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." In the beginning, God put his breath into Adam. Today, Jesus puts his Spirit in us. There is no life without Creator,

Word, and Spirit; without the Triune God we are bones in the dust, waiting for the salvation that can come only through the hearing of the Word and the receiving of the Spirit and the renewal of our created selves in the waters of holy baptism.

I must make a confession. I had another version of this sermon prepared, one that I had drafted long before the coronavirus pandemic swept through the world and sent us all into our own version of exile. In that first sermon, I felt I had to be faithful to what I believe is the main theme of Ezekiel, which is that we do not dare cry “peace, peace, when there is no peace,” that it imperils the soul to preach false comfort or to pretend that the judgment of the Lord is not real. But I worried that was too gloomy. I want to encourage us and lift us up in this time of unprecedented anxiety and uncertainty about the future! So I sent the draft to a good friend from seminary, and I asked him, what can I do to make Ezekiel more cheerful?! He replied immediately – what could be more cheerful than dry bones coming to life?

Well, indeed, I had no answer to that! What *could* be more cheerful than dry bones coming to life? What could be more cheerful than a God who is so merciful that he sent his Son to die to restore the dead to life? What could be more cheerful than the knowledge that this same God holds us and the whole world in his hands, and that there is nothing – neither life nor death, neither tribulation nor distress, neither danger nor pandemic, neither things present nor things to come - that can separate us from his love? The more I think about the unsurpassed love and faithfulness of God, the more I feel like getting up and dancing like an animated skeleton singing, “Hear de Word of de Lord!”

Everyone who puts faith in God’s mighty and efficacious Word will be raised from the dust - will have a new heart, a new mind, and a new and everlasting hope. Bones will come together, sinew and flesh, and the breath of God the Creator will restore life and there will be rejoicing forever and forever. Jesus is the Word, and everywhere we have failed, he has triumphed. Where we were deaf, he gives us ears to hear. Where we were dead in our sins, he gives us life in him. Where there is fear, confusion, sorrow, and panic, he gives us Himself, and the rest fades away. To Him be all glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen

(The Prayers, next page)

THE PRAYERS

Let us pray for the whole Church of Christ and for all people according to their needs, praying "...hear our prayer."

Almighty God, giver of all things, with gladness we give thanks for all your goodness. We bless you for the love which has created and which sustains us from day to day. We praise you for the gift of your Son our Savior, through whom you have made known your will and grace. We thank you for the Holy Spirit, the comforter; for your holy Church; for the means of grace and the fruits of the Spirit; for the lives of all faithful and good people; and for the hope of the life to come. Help us to treasure in our hearts all that our Lord has done for us, and enable us to show our thankfulness by lives that are wholly given to your service. Lord, in your mercy...

Preserve our nation in justice and honor, that we will lead a peaceable life of integrity. Grant health and favor to all who bear office in our land, including the President of the United States, the Governor of this State, and all those who make, administer, and judge our laws, and cause them to serve this people according to your holy will. Lord, in your mercy...

Bring an end to the coronavirus, this COVID 19. Bring an end to it, we pray, both here and abroad. Pour out your healing mercies on those who suffer with this sickness, and grant wisdom, strength, and grace to medical people and to everyone trying to help others. Lord, in your mercy...

Almighty and most merciful God, we call to mind before you all those whom it would be easy to forget: the beggars on the sidewalks here and abroad, the homeless, the destitute, the sick, the aged, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor. Lord, in your mercy...

We commend our neighborhood to your care, that it will be kept free from social strife and decay. Save those facing danger this night, including soldiers, police, and firefighters. Lord, in your mercy...

Raise up any who have been laid low by depression, imprisonment, loneliness, or sickness, including Ron Miko, Paul Vetrano, Mark Devine, Faith

Stoudt, Carlos Opio, Tom Uzzo, Michael Nelson, Ivan Sanchez, and Caroline Magnotta. Be their Great Physician of body and soul. Lord, in your mercy...

Let us pray in silence for our needs and the needs of others.