



The New England Church Pulpit

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DISJOINTED

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Ezekiel 37.1-14

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 that was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: 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."

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. 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. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, 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." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

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.' 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord. 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.

Tao Te Ching 16

Empty your mind of all thoughts.
Let your heart be at peace.
Watch the turmoil of beings,
but contemplate their return.

Each separate being in the universe
returns to the common source.
Returning to the source is serenity.

If you don't realize the source,
you stumble in confusion and sorrow.
When you realize where you come from,
you naturally become tolerant,
engaged, amused,
kindhearted as a grandmother,
dignified as a king.
Immersed in the wonder of The Way,
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes, you are ready.

Each time I read this passage about dry bones I can't help but think that the prophet Ezekiel must have been smoking funny cigarettes and drinking some homemade hooch from his traveling still when he had this vision. What an image this conjures up on the mind! But such is the word of the Lord that comes to Ezekiel in a vision, a vision of hope that is as desperately needed as rain on the parched soil of Israel's captivity. It is a vivid image, and one filled with the possibility of life, which becomes the call for us to prophesy today.

Ezekiel was a temple priest during the time when Israel was wiped out by the Babylonians, a resounding defeat for Israel, forcing those who survived into exile as refugees a long way from their homeland in what is modern day Iraq. Ezekiel morphs from temple priest to prophet when no temple is available in a foreign land, being led in a vision to a valley, not of the shadow of death, but of death itself. Our wildest imaginations can't conceive the grief and horror of these dry bones representing the death of Israel, dry and disjointed in a foreign land.

We don't have to go back that far in history to recall other valleys of bones: the Holocaust during WWII that plunged millions of the Jews, gypsies, homosexuals and the infirm into concentration camps a long way from home, most of whom died without returning home; the Khmer Rouge killing 25% of the Cambodian population. Or the Hutu and Tutsi conflict that killed over 500,000 whose skulls and bones were stacked high as a sort of altar to evil.

We don't even have to go back to a geographical location or a time in history to understand something of Ezekiel's words. We only need to expose the interior of our own souls where skeletons hang in proverbial closets, hoping for some word of hope and a breath of new life.

The day you lost your job.
The day of the diagnosis.
The day the love of your life was taken away from you.
The day your friend died in an accident.

The day you lost faith in yourself because of some deed of unkindness.
The day you were betrayed.
The day the news headlines were about something that affected you personally.
The day your kid was sent off to the war on the other side of the globe.
The days you wonder if there really is a God.

(adapted from a sermon entitled "God's Not Finished" on the website of the Kirk of Kildaire, Cary, N.C.)

These dry bones, lifeless and helpless, fill the valley of our lives and we want to say to the prophet when he says that these bones shall live: "I don't think so. It feels pretty hopeless." Very few of us escape life without traipsing through the valley of bones at one time or another. We'd like to get to Easter without going through Good Friday but it can't be done. We'd like to go back to the Garden of Eden or go forward to the utopia of paradise but we can't do that, either.

When asked if these bones can live, even the great prophet Ezekiel admits he doesn't know. "But," he says, "God knows." The problem for us is that God doesn't do it the way we want it done, so believing that God knows holds little hope. We want a God who will grant us life without pain; grant us life without tragedy; grant us life without the unknown. Like the father of the boy with epilepsy in Mark's gospel, when Jesus asked him if he believed, he said "I believe; but help my unbelief." Most of us are there, aren't we? We believe something, we're not always sure what, but we certainly need help on those days, and perhaps years, when believing is nigh on to impossible.

Ultimately, the Israelites did get to return to their homeland but not with any breakneck speed; many who heard the prophecy didn't get to partake of its reality. Neither did their children or great grandchildren. So does that count? If the prophesy becomes reality one hundred years from now does that make it real for me today, when I won't be here, even if I believed it would happen? If we could just have foresight to know that the bones will live again, we could believe.

The reality is that we do have insight, if not foresight; it is called the experience of others. People who lose children learn to cope by observing and being upheld by people who have lost children. Those who have survived such a tragedy don't necessarily realize they've succeeded at anything of great consequence in coping except to put one disjointed foot in front of the other; but others whose lives have been turned into a living hell see them doing it and receive a fresh breath of encouragement. We do it because we've seen our ancestors do it; we're here because they did it through two world wars and a great depression. Those who survived in the past are the prophets whose perseverance and faith are the tendons and flesh that breathe resurrection into our dry bones.

A colleague of mine tells of a friend who was the victim of a traffic accident that made him a quadriplegic. Without use of arms, hands, legs or feet, Sam learned to write with a pencil in his mouth, and ultimately began painting with a brush between his teeth as a way of coping with his tragedy while nurturing his spirit. Whenever anyone visited Sam during the length of his post-accident life, they were conscripted into the world of painting. It didn't matter if you wanted to or if you had any talent in that regard; when you went to see Sam, you painted. This friend said upon observing this ritual day after day, she prayed for some pill to undo his paralysis or some prayer to convince God of the need for a miracle, of putting his bones and sinew, tendons and the connection to the brain back together again so he could move his limbs.

What ultimately happened at Sam's bedside day after day, when people came to talk and ultimately paint, was a resurrection, a new life, as new paintings were made and relationships strengthened in ways unseen at the time. Every time Sam lost ground physically, losing something that he thought he couldn't live without, he found out he could. And each day new visitors made new paintings to cover the walls of his room, and when the time came for him to lay down his brush for the last time, those friends around him realized that he had spent every last ounce of his life reconnecting old, dry bones. While his physical body was wasting away, his emotional valley of dry bones was being connected to God and the people around him through a paintbrush and a wall papered with pictures of new life. (adapted from a story by Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Christian Century*, March 13, 1996)

How can these bones live? We don't know. But God is never finished; the world keeps evolving, adapting, reconnecting. The future is built on the shoulders of all who have come before, even when the shoulders are dry, dead, disjointed bones. The bones live—in the collective memory, in the remembered history, in the activity of our own prophesying. Death indeed seems like the enemy, the finality of all that exists for us individually. But we are an Easter people. We believe that God still speaks, still works out holy purpose even through evil enemies; that even death becomes the inspiration for some to take up a cause. When life is painfully disjointed, we are forced to accept the tender mercies that life offers, even if they are not the ones we prayed for.

And you shall know that I am the Lord. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.

Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.

And so we trust. And so we live. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

PASTORAL PRAYER

Because we did not make ourselves; because we do not keep ourselves; because we cannot forgive ourselves; our hearts reach out to you, O God. We thank you for our creation and preservation, and the graces that come to us through recognized and unrecognized sources: for hills to climb, burdens to carry, temptations to resist, and fears to overcome. We thank you for all that helps us in our pilgrimage in this life: the remembrance of those who walked this way before us and did well; signs of your presence, often in unlikely places, giving us to know that we are not alone; the unanswerable logic of lives given over to the quest for freedom in selfless love. With all that lies within us we acclaim your goodness and speak our appreciation.

Grant us purposefulness, God of creation. Forgive us for our aimless living, for assuming the world will also be here to provide for us without our participation in keeping water and air and earth clean from the pollution that selfish living creates. Help us discover a purpose in life that would engage our involvement so that all our existence will be drawn together around loyalty to life. We have only to think of the selfless love and nurturing of our mothers, and those who were like mothers to us, to find examples of purposeful, intentional, mindful living.

Grant us faith, O God, in values so beautiful and good that our lives will be drawn into unity by our vision and love of them. Save us from cynicism, from skepticism, from all those maladies of the mind and moods of the spirit that spoil our lives. Help us this day to see all that is excellent and august in life; give us wisdom to celebrate the beautiful and the good as did our mothers who overlooked the bad to focus on what is helpful and edifying.

Forgive us our prejudices and hatreds whereby we have cut asunder our humanity and have made of what might be an earthly paradise a hard and bitter hell. Against all that divides us—within our own nation and among the nations of the world—unite us for every cause that works for good will and peace, for justice and hope. Mothering God, we pray you to deliver us from policies of selfish isolation, from the obsessions with being the best and the biggest, against all grudges that cut through the co-operations of humanity. Offer your benediction upon the peace of the world so our children may live in a more hopeful world than ours.

To that end, we offer our prayers that we may be part of the remembrance that helps bring to old, dry bones a new life that springs with beauty and peace. Amen.

(Adapted from a prayer by Ernie Campbell, Riverside Church, New York from his book *Where Cross the Crowded Ways*)