

Dry Bones — Rev. Denise Stone

Text: Ezekiel 37:1–14

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH BIG FLATS NY, 03-14-2021

¹ 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; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” ⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ 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.”

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.” ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ 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.’ ¹² 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ 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.”ⁱ

The Word of the Lord, **Thanks Be to God**

Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. We are getting closer to Holy Week and Easter and yet we are not quite there.

With COVID issues: the vaccinations becoming available to more and more people and yet the rise of variant strains of the virus, we are beginning to see the “light at the end of the tunnel” and yet we are still what seems to be far away from any sense of normalcy.

In very many ways, we might feel like the Israelites of Ezekiel’s vision of Dry Bones.

Most commentaries stress that Ezekiel’s vision was about the eventual return to the land of Israel of the descendants of those Jews who had been marched against their will to Babylon. The dry bones

represent the dusty sense of hopelessness that the exiles would ever find their way home. “These bones are the whole house of Israel,” Ezekiel is told (v. 11), and they will, one day, return to the land of Israel.ⁱⁱ

Each year we are reminded by the observance of Lent to look beyond ourselves to journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem and Good Friday and to spend time reflecting on all that God has done for us and preparing to eventually celebrate the Good News of Easter.

We often want to rush through Lent and Holy Week to get to Easter. However, the call of Lent is to pause and spend time with our “dry bones” and the grief of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday.

Put yourselves in the shoes of the Israelites to whom Ezekiel’s vision was addressed.

Ezekiel’s vision is given for a people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of the spirit, a living death in exile in a foreign land. Their temple has been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either killed or dragged off into a foreign land. Ezekiel witnesses the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones.ⁱⁱⁱ

We need to sit with this image and reality for a bit. It is far too easy to skip the pain of the images and run to the

resuscitation of the dry bones. It is far too easy to skip the pain of suffering and moments of frustration and run to God's act of redemption.

The reality of life for the Israelites of the exile was that they thought God had abandoned them at best and that God was not God at worst.

This is a reality for anyone who encounters pain, suffering and/or grief. We can feel that God has abandoned us or that God is not even God at all. We cry out in despair and can be angry or depressed or both.

Consider for a moment, what are your "dry bones, individually?", what are our "dry bones, communally?"

In an article written in 2014, Dr. Katherine Amos penned words that could easily have been written this year,

As we progress through Lent, perhaps it would be valuable for us to consider what dry bones (and dry times) are represented in our own spiritual lives. What can we learn from the lonely and parched periods of our spiritual journeys? The "dark night of the soul" is familiar in literature and the human experience. Most of us can point to periods of time when doubts, hopelessness, depression, fear, and anxiety were prominent in our daily living. Certainly

hopelessness and despair were a communal experience for the people of Israel at the time of Ezekiel's vision of dry bones. What could we possibly learn from these "dry" periods of life when we feel as disconnected and brittle as the bones in Ezekiel's vision?^{iv}

As your Pastor, I certainly know some of the pain and suffering you have encountered, especially in this past year. I do not, however, know all about your pain and suffering. I do not know about all the times you have felt like an Israelite in exile. I don't need to know all of it to know you have or still do carry it with you.

When I have these "dry periods of life," I want to fix it and move on. I don't want to learn from it, I want to forget it happened. Perhaps you have felt the same way.

However, I have also found that while I want to move on, I cannot – until I've spent time examining all that has happened and spending time with God. Being angry with God, crying out to God, whining to God, and ultimately pleading with God for relief.

These are all valid ways to express your feelings and thoughts to God.

Philip Yancey, in his book, "Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud"^v, reminds us regarding Job,

One bold message in the Book of Job is that you can say anything to God. Throw at him your grief, your anger, your doubt, your bitterness, your betrayal, your disappointment—he can absorb them all. As often as not, spiritual giants of the Bible are shown contending with God. They prefer to go away limping, like Jacob, rather than to shut God out.

Philip Yancey

Disappointment with God: Three Questions No One Asks Aloud

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What is it that God offers to us in those times when we, like Job, feel helpless or hopeless or angry and frustrated?

The message of Ezekiel's vision to the Israelites and the message to us today is the same.

God ***has not*** abandoned us. God ***IS*** God.

In the vision, God asks Ezekiel a question. God asks, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel answers, "O Lord GOD, you know."

Ezekiel had faith in God, that God and only God could take the dead, dry bones of the Israelites and their faith and restore them to life.

We need to claim that same faith in God. That God and only God could take the dead, dry bones of our lives and of our faith and restore them life.

Today we hear a promise only God can give. God tells the prophet to speak to these bones, saying: “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live” (v. 5). God promises not only sinews and flesh and skin, but, most importantly, God calls the breath to come from the four winds and breathe upon the slain. So it happens. This breath is the spirit of God, the life-giving *ruach* God breathed into the first human creature in the garden. This breath moves forth in the Lazarus story. This same breath was breathed into Jesus crucified, lifting him up to resurrection life, and touched us when the Spirit came upon us in baptism. This breath moves through the world, raising people into new life when all the odds are against it.^{vi}

We will move quickly from today through the rest of Lent. Let me invite us all to take hold of the offer to look beyond ourselves to journey with Jesus towards Jerusalem and Good Friday. Spend time reflecting on all that God has done for us, even in the face of our dry bones periods.

Remember, God ***has not*** abandoned us. God ***IS*** God.

When God asks us if these bones can live, let us respond “Oh Lord God, you know!”

Please pray with me.

Compassionate God,
the wind of your Spirit is the very sign of life
for all who long for you.

One breath from you and we are rescued
from the arid valley of dry bones,
given muscles and sinews and joy with which to
praise you,
and filled with the holy hope you grant to all your
faithful children.

Let our whole lives be filled with the life-breath of
the Spirit, that what has lain dormant may burst into
bloom, and what looks to us to be death
may be revealed as but sleep
before the emergence of new life. Amen.^{vii}

ⁱ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ⁱⁱ Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown; Long, Kimberly Bracken. Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion (p. 82). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown; Long, Kimberly Bracken. Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion (p. 90). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown; Long, Kimberly Bracken. Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion (p. 85). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

^v <https://www.facebook.com/MINDFULCHRISTIANITY/photos/a.1657258524556329/2876714965944006/>.

^{vi} Bartlett, David L.; Taylor, Barbara Brown; Long, Kimberly Bracken. Feasting on the Word Lenten Companion (p. 90). Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

^{vii} <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2014/03/call-to-worship-opening-prayer-lent-5a.html>. From *Come Out! On the Breath of God, Service Prayers for the fifth Sunday of Lent*, written by the Rev. Elizabeth Dille. Posted on the United Church of Christ's Worship Ways website. <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/>.