

Them Bones, That Breath
July 10, 2022
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Ezekiel 37:1-14

In our text for today the people are quoted as saying,

“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

“One finds similar language in the lament psalms.

‘My strength fails because of my misery, and *my bones* waste away’

(Ps 31:10).

‘*My bones* are shaking with terror’ (6:2).

‘*My bones* burn like a furnace’ (102:3).

The reference to ‘bones’ here is an idiomatic way of referring to one's deepest self, or, in the case of ‘*our bones*,’ a way for the community to refer to its most essential self.”¹

We have lots of idioms using the word “bone” in a similar way:

Oh, I can feel it in my bones.

Or that cuts to the bone.

We are bone-tired or chilled to the bone.

He doesn't have a mean bone in his body.

All of these phrases use the word “bone” to refer in some way to our core self or the deepest part of us.

When the people in our story said “Our bones are dried up,”

they meant their very selves were dried up, dead, without life;

and given their situation at the time, we can't blame them.

“The prophet Ezekiel [and the people to whom he ministered]

had lived through the final, fateful fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

[The prophet] and his friends and relatives had been marched off from Judah to life in captivity in Babylon.

There he was witness to the unraveling of the social fabric among his people.

He watched their disorientation emerge.”²

¹ Jacobson, Rolf. www.WorkingPreacher.org

² Thomson, Judith E. *Lectionary Homiletics: Back Issues Plus, Pastoral Implications*.

From the days of their search for the Promised Land,
they had always been the people of the land.

And now they had no land.

The key symbols of Judean faith—

Jerusalem, its temple, and the Davidic monarchy—
had been destroyed.

This meant no political identity.

No religious identity.

No future.

To make matter worse, they had already seen something like this
happen to someone else.

“A century-and-a-half previously, many citizens of Judah's sister kingdom Israel
had been similarly deported, had lost their identity,
and had faded into the mists of history—the so-called lost tribes of Israel.”³

So they knew what awaited them—being lost.

No wonder they said: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely.”

Have you ever felt like your bones were dried up,
like your hope was lost,

like you were cut off completely from all that gave you life and joy?

Many of us have experienced the valley of dry bones at some point in our lives.

A failed marriage.

A broken relationship.

A business dream turned to bankruptcy.

A personal dream never come true.

An estranged child.

A fatal accident.

An untimely death.

Just about any major loss can leave us feeling as if life were a valley of dry bones.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” God asked Ezekiel

as they overlooked the valley in his vision or dream or whatever it was.

We are told that Ezekiel replied, “*You know, Lord.*”

³ Jacobson.

The answer was a bit of a cop-out on Ezekiel's part.
He didn't want to say the bones couldn't live
and be reprimanded for his lack of faith.
He didn't want to say the bones could live
when he had no faith that they could.
So he said "You know, Lord," which is the equivalent of "Only God knows!"

Or it's possible I've misunderstood. Perhaps his response was more like
"You *know*, Lord, it didn't have to be this way. You could have intervened.
You could have stopped it.
You could have made everything turn out right.
But you didn't.
You didn't stop the cancer.
You didn't take the wheel.
You didn't remove the pain.
You didn't stop the marauding enemy.
And now look. A valley of dry bones."

Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones.
This vision of Ezekiel's had to be a dream,
because who would prophesy to dry bones?
What preacher would preach to the dead and gone?
Our job is to preach to the living.

Sometimes.
And sometimes our job is to preach to those who still linger in the valley.
Anyway, in this dreamworld that they inhabited together,
Ezekiel did as he was told, and so began God's miraculous work of reversal,
reversing the power of death.
First the bones came back together, then sinew and muscle, and then flesh.
But they did not breathe.

It is not the preaching that brings people to life.
It is not the rattling of bones that brings people to life.
It is God's Spirit. God's breath. God's mighty *ruach* in Hebrew.

In seminary, I had a beloved old professor who was in his last year of teaching.
His favorite Hebrew word was *ruach*.

Often if he was lecturing and he was afraid he was losing students' attention,
he would have us all stand, raise our arms as we breathed in,
and on the exhale we would lower our arms as we all said *ruach*.
He always had us do this three times because
this Hebrew word has three primary meanings:
wind, breath, and spirit.

This is the word that is used in Genesis 1 when the wind from God swept over
the waters of creation.

Ruach.

This is the word used in 1 Samuel when young David is anointed
to one day become king,
and the spirit of the Lord came upon him. *Ruach.*

This is the word used in Isaiah when the prophet proclaims

“The *spirit* of the Lord God is upon me because . . .

God has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.”

Ruach.

And the word appears 10 times in our 14 verses for today, with phrases such as
“I will cause breath to enter you”
and “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain”
and “I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.”

Ruach. Ruach. Ruach.

Ezekiel saw the bones rattling, saw them coming together,
saw the flesh grow back upon them.

But it wasn't until God's *ruach*, God's breath, God's spirit,
blew into the people that they came to life.

Imagine it: God's breath, God's wind, God's spirit
blowing through your life,
blowing through your dry places,
blowing through your valleys of dry bones.

What might happen?

What might happen if you let God's spirit blow through your life?

Remember, this is the *ruach* of God that came upon a young boy
and filled him and guided him as he grew up to be king.

What might it guide you to be able to do?

What might happen if we let God's spirit blow through our church,
through our communal life together?

This is the *ruach* of God that empowered the prophet
to proclaim liberty to the captives
and release to the prisoners.

How might it empower us to break the chains of bondage?

We are living in a time where hope is hard to come by.

We are living in a time of extremism and hatred,
violence and despair.

From where we stand, life is getting scarier each day.

And sometimes we get the wind knocked out of us.

A Supreme Court ruling that will allow more pollutants in the air.

News of mass shootings.

Even horrible news of a tragedy right here in Northfield.

And I know some of us would love for the graves to be opened
and our beloved brought back to life.

Unfortunately, that is the stuff of visions and dreams rather than reality.

This is not ultimately a story of resurrection,
where the dead are brought back to life.

This is a story of creation.

God "initiated the whole human enterprise

by making humans from dust

and breathing into them the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

God likewise initiated the entire Israelite project,

choosing to take slaves from Egypt,

giving them God's own law, and bringing them to a good land—

and doing this with minimal cooperation (Ezekiel 20:5-14).

Now, Ezekiel says, God will take the initiative yet again:

God's spirit will bring new life to a people dead as bones."⁴

⁴ Tull, Patricia. { HYPERLINK "http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3200" }. (Note: the English transliteration is spelled differently by different scholars—as rua, ruah, and ruach. It is the same Hebrew word.

It is the Spirit of God—and only the Spirit of God—
who can bring life where there is no life.

The breath, wind, spirit of God, breathes new life into even the driest bones.

Into our anxious places, God breathes.

Into our hopeless situation, God breathes.

Into our dead, empty spaces, God breathes.

And it is new life and it is creation and God says “It is good.”