

Bone-Deep

Ezekiel 37:1-14

CWZepp, BWCOB, March 29, 2020

*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Now hear the word of the Lord!*

I had to get that out of my system. That old classic is where my mind goes first whenever I read this best known passage from Ezekiel. I often think it's a bit goofy, but the author, James Weldon Johnson, is a favorite of mine. And that's where my mind was about two and a half weeks ago when I began thinking in earnest about preaching this week.

And then everything changed. In a little over 48 hours, schools had closed, we cancelled services and activities, and life interrupted became the theme of our days. In the weeks since, words like social distancing, sheltering in place, self-isolation, and quarantines have become our common language. Images that were previously reserved for Hollywood thrillers are now a common sight – healthcare workers dressed in hazmat gear, common citizens wearing masks and gloves in grocery stores and on the streets, rows and rows of makeshift hospital beds treating overflow patients, outbreak charts and maps, public venues that were once bustling with activity now akin to ghost towns. It's all a bit surreal.

Little did we know when Pastor Christy suggested wilderness as a theme for our Lenten worship this year how apropos this theme would be for us all. Nor did I have any inkling when I chose Ezekiel as our focus text for worship today how uncannily fitting its message would be for us in this moment.

Like just about every one of you listening to this, my life has been turned upside down in the past two weeks. Routines have been disrupted, circles of support have been compromised, amusements have been cancelled, work has changed drastically, spaces that were previously sanctuaries and refuges of rest now feel confining and claustrophobic, conveniences that were taken for granted like soap and toilet paper have become precious commodities. And every day seems to bring new bad news.

And perhaps the worst thing of all – we have no idea when it is all going to end. The future has pretty much been put on hold. And I think we are all wondering when, and if, life will ever get back to “normal”? Can our seniors plan to ever have a graduation ceremony? Is it foolish to make summer plans for vacations, camps, conferences? When will we again be able to celebrate weddings and funerals and birthdays and family reunions? When will I again be allowed to visit my grandmother, or even set foot on the campus of a retirement community?

Suddenly, with new ears I hear anew Ezekiel's voice saying, “O Lord God, you know.” I've always wondered whether those words were uttered with conviction or resignation. “Mortal, can these bones lives?” “O Lord God, you know.” (Implicit...yes, if you want them to.) Or alternatively, “O Lord, God...you know (Implicit...I do not).

Now, with the perspective gained in recent days, I'm not so sure I need to choose. I can easily imagine it was both for Ezekiel. Because that's how things have been for me of late. In these past weeks I have found myself a big old jumbled mess of emotions. Anger and trust, fear and

faith, selfishness and compassion, frustration and contentment, anxiety and peace, exhaustion and passion – all of these have been simmering like a stew low down deep in my bones.

I have become convinced that the deep things of life – the things that we can legitimately talk about feeling in our bones – these things are seldom simple. Rarely are they black and white. And so it is that I imagine Ezekiel, transported out of whatever it was that he was doing at the time, taken by the hand of God and plopped down in the middle of some God-forsaken valley full of dry and dusty bones, and led around in silence for a while to soak it all in. What would he have been thinking and feeling?

Now, we have to remember the real world from which Ezekiel had been taken and in which he prophesied. He speaks not from Israel nor from Judah, but from Babylon, exiled from a country that has died, its temple and capital city destroyed. The Babylonians had killed the sons of their last king, Zedekiah, before his eyes; then they blinded him and led him off, in bronze chains, to Babylon. They destroyed the temple and much of the rest of Jerusalem. Many of the exiles' family members and friends were killed, wounded or missing. And they understandably wondered...Had God abandoned them forever? Would they cease to exist as a people, hundreds of miles from home? Would they ever return? How could they survive in a strange land?

Like earlier prophets, Ezekiel understands this disaster not simply as the unfortunate result of Babylon's empire-building. To him, since nothing can happen unless God allows it, Judah's people and especially their leaders brought this devastation upon themselves by their disobedience to God. And the prophet is understandably pessimistic about human goodness. He sees little evidence that Judeans will choose more wisely in the future than they have in the past. Though blessed with moral agency, they are no more able to use this faculty well than lifeless bones are able to get up and walk.

If we have any doubt about the intent of Ezekiel's prophetic vision, it should be cleared up by the time we get to verse 11 of our reading. God says to Ezekiel, "These bones are [your people –] the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." We are doomed. We are done for. We are finished.¹ We also might remember the words of Psalm 137 -- "By the rivers of Babylon -- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion ... How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" This is a picture of despair, of a people in agony, of a situation in which all hope was lost.

It is into that despair and that hopelessness that God tells Ezekiel to prophesy. God gives Ezekiel a vision with a message to his people: Thus sayeth the Lord: Fear not, and be not afraid, for I will raise you up! Verse 14 brings it home: "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 can't help but hear echoes of the words of another prophet of exile. Jeremiah 29:11-14: "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile." Perhaps less well known are the times when Ezekiel had

¹ From *NRSV, Tanakh, NJB, and NLT translations.*

previously prophesied a similar message to his people. Just one chapter prior to this vision, we find similar words of hope: “A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh...Then you shall live in the land that I gave to your ancestors; and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.”²

Turns out, this is God’s message time and time again to the people of Israel and Judah in exile through the prophets. This bone-deep despair that they feel at present is not their end. Trust in God. Keep the faith. And I will lift your spirits out of the valleys – out of the wilderness – and give you a future with hope.

And so I return to Ezekiel, wandering silently around that valley of dry bones, asked by the Almighty whether they can live again. He’s been down this road before with God and with his people. Maybe not with the bones and such, but that same spiritual and emotional road all the same. Can those bones live? Could the despair and doubt and disillusionment that the exiles were feeling deep down in their bones in their present circumstances yield to a brighter future – a future with hope?

And in that moment, I can’t help but think that Ezekiel might have been feeling much like I have over these past few weeks. Despair *and* hope. Resignation *and* conviction. Doubt *and* faith. Grief *and* promise. Fear *and* encouragement. Weariness *and* new life. Not one or the other. Not one then the other. All at the same time. Can these bones live? Lord God – you know...

You know where we are. You know what’s been going on. You know the state of our hearts and our spirits. You know that this malaise isn’t a fleeting feeling. You know that our anguish is bone-deep.

But you also know where we have been *and* where we are going. You know that we are resilient. You know our ultimate loyalty, even when we falter. You know that our faith also runs bone-deep.

Can these bones live? O Lord, God – you know.

It is a question that endures for us today. Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has observed that Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of dried bones bears no date, because every generation needs to hear in its own time that these bones can live again.³ It is in the midst of tribulation, when the storms of life are raging, that we most need to be reminded that the God who created us can also re-create us. When we are caught up in circumstances beyond our control, and we feel a weariness that is bone-deep, it is then that we most need to once again breathe deep the breath of life. It is in the deepest depths, when death threatens not only our bodies, but even more acutely our spirits, it is then that we need to be reminded of the one who gives us life in the first place, and who promises us life anew.

In these days of the Covid-19 pandemic, we are indeed in the wilderness of exile, cut off from our normal lives and our normal relationships. And we have no idea when it is all going to end, but we don’t have any reason to think it will be soon. And so it is no wonder that we would feel a bone-deep weariness.

But mixed in with that weariness are the seeds of hope, promising that the God who breathed life into a lump of clay, who stitched flesh onto dry bones and made them live, who saw the

² Ezekiel 36:26,28

³ Quoted in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol.VI, pp. 1504.

Israelites returned from exile, who raised Jesus from the dead, and whose spirit comforts and sustains us still – will not leave us or forsake us, and will give us a future with hope. This too we know bone-deep.

Poet and minister Theresa Novak puts it beautifully:

*My bones know,
Underneath it all,
Within.*

*I have lived
In the valley of the dry bones,
Waiting for the four winds to blow,
For the holy breath.*

*Dry bones
Fragile and hard
Spin through the dance
As the rain falls.*

Bones rattling to life

*Spring is coming.
Praise God.⁴*

Praise God indeed. May we know this deep-down in our bones...

*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.
Now hear the word of the Lord!*

May those who have ears to hear, hear...

⁴ “Dry Bones – Images from Ezekiel 37.” *Sermons, Poetry, and Other Musings*. Online: <https://theresauuco.wordpress.com/2018/06/12/bones/>

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

Call to Prayer

On Friday, Pope Francis stood in the Vatican before a starkly empty and rainy St. Peter's Square at twilight to celebrate an unprecedented ritual for an unprecedented time. He delivered his "Urbi et Orbi" address – "To the City and the World" – a blessing normally reserved only for Christmas, Easter, and the installation of a new pope – to an empty square that was a sign of the times to the faithful tuning in to the broadcast on TV, online, or on the radio.

Pope Francis spoke about how the world currently in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic feels the way Jesus' disciples felt when a storm threatened to flood their boat, but Jesus stayed asleep. "We find ourselves afraid and lost," he said. "We were caught off-guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other."

His words were a balm for my soul, as I trust they are for us all. So I am incorporating many of them into the prayer which will follow our hymn, along with a very few of my own. Now, please pray with us, as we begin in song...

Hymn # 558 *When the storms of life are raging* (vv. 1&2)

Pastoral Prayer

Gracious and merciful God...

Your word strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything.. We let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. And now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: "Wake up, Lord!" Why are you not standing with us?

We hear your response... "Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?" Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently... "Return to me with all your heart". You are calling on us to seize this time of trial as a time of choosing... a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not. It is a time to get our lives back on track with regard to you, Lord, and to others.

God, this storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits, and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We have deprived ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters. We can look to so many exemplary companions for the journey, who, even though fearful, have reacted by giving their lives. This is the force of the Spirit poured out and fashioned in courageous and generous self-denial. It is the life in the Spirit that can redeem, value and demonstrate how our lives are woven together and sustained by ordinary people – often forgotten people – who do not appear in newspaper and magazine headlines nor on the grand catwalks of the latest show, but who without any doubt are in these very days writing the decisive events of our time: doctors, nurses, supermarket employees, cleaners, caregivers, providers of transport, law and order forces, volunteers, scientists and researchers, teachers and educational administrators, government leaders, and so very many others...

We know that... no one reaches salvation by themselves. In the face of so much suffering, where the authentic development of our peoples is assessed, we experience the priestly prayer of Jesus: "That they may all be one". How many people every day are exercising patience and offering hope, taking care to sow not panic but a shared responsibility? How many fathers, mothers, grandparents and teachers are showing our children, in small everyday gestures, how to face up to and navigate a crisis by adjusting their routines, lifting their gaze, and fostering prayer and loving kindness? How many are praying, offering and interceding for the good of all? Love, prayer, and quiet service: may these be our victorious weapons.

God, our hearts are indeed heavy with all those who are sick and dying from the coronavirus, and with those who are sick and dying from other ailments and are cut off from their loved ones because of the need for quarantines. Our hearts ache for the lonely, the scared, the forgotten. Our compassion is stirred as we think of all those who now find themselves without work, whose businesses have been shuttered, whose plans and dreams have been shattered. And while many of our own complaints and frustrations are first world problems – inconveniences & annoyances – we nevertheless know that you embrace us where we are – and your embrace may in fact be the only one we can know right now. And so we rest our weary souls in you, and trust in the one thing that we know we can count on right now...Amen.

Words of Assurance – Psalm 130:5-7

(The Message, adapted for the plural)

We pray to God—our lives a prayer—
and wait for what God will say and do.
Our lives on the line before God, our Lord,
waiting and watching...
waiting and watching till morning.

[We] wait and watch for God—
with God's arrival comes love,
with God's arrival comes generous redemption...

Silence

Hymn Insert *I will come to you in the silence*

Benediction

My friends, I miss you terribly.

I miss being with you. I miss singing with you. I miss sharing jokes and stories over cups of coffee with you. I miss playing with your children in the Greeting Hall on Sunday mornings and Wednesday Nights. I miss hanging out with our youth. I miss being the old guy that gets to infiltrate your BSM meetings. I miss being able to visit with you whenever we wished, even if it wasn't that often. I miss your hugs and handshakes. I miss you.

Being here this hour in a nearly empty sanctuary and talking to a camera with a skeleton crew only makes me miss you more.

But we're going to be alright. This too shall pass. And until we're able to be together again in the flesh as well as the spirit, I will treasure you in my heart, as I know you will treasure each other. And I pray that the peace that surpasses understanding will sustain you through these days of sheltering in place, for there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And so there is nothing that can truly separate us from one another. Peace be with you...Amen.