

Spirit Within

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Happy Pentecost Day...this is the birthday of the Church. However, unlike most of my sermons on this Sunday, today we deal with a different time and experience of God's Spirit. Few parts of the Bible offer richer material for visualization and imagery than Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones. As we read our text, it is virtually impossible not to envision a desert scene with bones and skulls lying in disarray as far as the eye can see. Ezekiel stands in the midst of the dry bones listening to the "words of the Lord."

As we envision this, 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 nights of the soul" is familiar in 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. We experience the death of loved ones; sickness; fear for ourselves, our children, our grandchildren. We are grieved by the violence in the world. We fear health problems and financial problems. We feel hopeless when we see the needs of those who seem so ill prepared to live as people of peace and wholeness in our fragmented world. Certainly hopelessness and despair were a communal experience for the people of Israel at the time of Ezekiel's vision of dry bones. So, what can we possibly learn from these "dry" periods of life when we feel as disconnected and brittle as the bones in Ezekiel's vision? Maybe God's question to us is,

"What can your spiritual dry bones teach you? What can you learn about yourself and your relationship with the world from the painful, difficult paths you are called to walk?"

In a recent issue of *National Geographic*, an article entitled "Lost Tribes of the Green Sahara" describes how archaeologists unearthed some 200 graves near a vanished lake that indicated the Sahara was once a fertile area. The skeletons buried there disclosed amazing information about two groups of people who had lived at least a thousand years apart. The bones and teeth unearthed from the graves revealed the sex, age, general health, diet, diseases, injuries, and habits of the deceased. The size and condition of the bones gave clues to lifestyles, work, and living conditions of the inhabitants.

Based on the teeth of the Kiffian people, investigators could tell that their diet included coarse grain; they drank from a local water source and probably did not travel far from Gobero, where they lived. The bones of the Ternerian people disclosed that they were more lightly built and may have been herders, but they also likely depended on hunting and fishing.

What would an analysis of our spiritual bones indicate? What would we find out about our spiritual maturity if we examined our spiritual bones? Would we show a deficiency of a substantial diet of study, reflection, prayer, and a meaningful relationship with God? What would this examination tell us about the richness of our spiritual practices? How sincerely do we long and pray for the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? What would be our answer if the Lord spoke directly to us and questioned, "Can these bones live?"

Can we honestly give the humble Ezekiel's response, "O Lord GOD, you know" (v. 3), to God's great offer of love and mercy? Who is God telling to

preach to our bones? What words do we need to hear for our life today? How do we open ourselves up to that living breath of the Spirit? God is so willing to breathe into us and fill us with the transformation that allows us to be a part of the kingdom of God. Can we envision our spiritual bones with new flesh and blood? **Katherine E. Amos**

This poignant description of dry bones strewn across a valley is one of the Bible's great gifts to both Jews and Christians. Under Ezekiel's watchful eye, these bones suddenly reassemble themselves in a great clatter, then are strapped with sinew and flesh and skin, and, finally, reanimated with a breath called forth from the four winds. Some see this as about a blessed afterlife for the dead, and this *Grey's Anatomy* account may be the earliest appearance in the Bible of what became a central belief for both rabbinic Judaism and Christianity: the resurrection of the body.

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.

For John Calvin, these verses are about arousing the despairing refugees to hope for a return. Ezekiel based his political hope upon a fundamental hope for the resurrection of the dead that is the source of all hope, "the chief model of all the deliverances that believers experience in this world." More than anything else human beings can hope for, Calvin claimed, the resurrection of the dead is so utterly dependent upon God that there can be no doubt that it lies outside of our powers. There are forms of immortality that are possible in the normal course of things—the survival of one's heirs,

influence, or reputation, for instance. For a body to be resuscitated long after it has begun to decompose, that is a miracle.

This brings into the foreground a theme of Ezekiel's vision that is so deeply engrained in Jewish and Christian thought that it can be missed. At the core of biblical narrative is the story of displacement—of having wandered a long way from home, and longing to return. This is the underlying plot of being cast out of Eden, of being foreigners in Egypt, of the journey to the promised land, of the longing of exiles in Babylon to return to the land of their fathers. **Kelton Cobb**

"Can these bones live?" God asks Ezekiel, challenging the prophet and all who have ever looked into the face of death, calling for a response. Ezekiel answered, "O Lord GOD, you know" (v. 3b). God does know. It is the God of Israel, the God who created the world and all that is in it, who brought a people to birth from a childless couple in Haran, who freed their descendants from the living death of slavery in Egypt and entered into covenant with them, who raised up judges and kings and prophets, calling them to life again and again, while they continued to choose death.

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 witnessed the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. Can these bones live? That is what God asks.

This vision is held up again today, when so many in the world have had their own experience of dry bones. Our earth has been fashioned into massive graveyards of dry bones, transforming valleys into vales of

desolation—from Darfur and the Congo and Zimbabwe to Myanmar and Pakistan and Iraq, from the gang slayings and the drug wars in our cities to all those places lacking food or drink or clothing or shelter or any respect for life. Not only is there the physical toll people continue to pay, but also the spiritual death that poverty, natural disasters, and genocide exact from people to reduce them to a state of dry bones. Can these bones live?

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. We need to hear the vision of Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. It is a scene meant to live in the imagination and the heart, when we find ourselves gasping for breath, struggling to stay alive. Where are the dry bones in your life, our lives, our community, our church today, where is the valley of death that needs to hear the promise of the living God?

We live now in the power of that same Spirit given by Jesus and poured into our hearts. Do you believe in the Spirit of God, the divine breath that brings new life wherever it blows? "Mortal, can these bones live?" Yes, Lord, most definitely yes. **James A. Wallace** Because God has given us

God's spirit which inspires us and empowers us to be and share the good news.

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