

“Dancing Bones?!”

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14

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Fifth Sunday in Lent

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I'd like to ask for your help with this message. Because, well, after hearing the Ezekiel text, I have a chorus to a song in the back of my head...maybe you do too. I'd like you to help me bring it out into the midst of all of us. You know the song – Dem bones. Can we sing the chorus together?

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 the Lord!

Two Sundays ago our gardening metaphor focused on water; and the need for living water in those dry places of our lives and soul. Today our reading takes us beyond dry to death itself. In gardening terms, that winter's day when everything is so brown and dead and I look out the window and think, will we ever see green again? Tree limbs take on a skeletal look and even rattle as the cold wind blows. Just like 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 the Lord!

Sometimes thought of as a kids' song to learn the body parts (the ankle bone connected to the shin bone, the shin bone connected to the knee bone, etc.). It's actually an African American spiritual thought to have been written down first in 1928; not a folks song but a spiritual because it speaks a word of faith. And after hearing today's scripture, we aren't surprised to learn that that was the story that inspired the song. The beginning of the spiritual is actually:

Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel connected dem dry bones,
Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones,
Now hear the word of the Lord.

The song is a familiar one and so is the vision of Ezekiel to many of us. But do you know the story behind the story?

The year was 587 BCE. It was a if not the low point of Israel's history. Their nation had become like a desert floor covered with dead skeletons in Death Valley. The Babylonians had wiped out the total Israelite army. It was no contest. The Babylonians were the strongest nation around. Babylonia was a great big nation; Israel was a dinky, little nation.

The temple was destroyed. The capital city was destroyed. The people were in total poverty. Everybody was hungry or on the edge of starvation. And the Israelite people who were alive

were taken as prisoners, back to Babylonia. The Jewish nation had become like the dead skeletons.

The Jews began lamenting to themselves, “God can’t help us. God won’t help us. There is no God. God is punishing us for our sins. We are here to rot and die in the desert. We have become like dry bones.”

To this time and place steps in the prophet Ezekiel with his Death Valley dry bones vision. “The hand of the Lord came upon me, and brought me out by the spirit and set me down in this valley of dry bones.” ‘Bone dry’ dry bones, so dry they rattled with the slightest breeze. And God told Ezekiel to speak to the bones, to prophecy, to tell of the deeds of God, that God is a mighty God slow to anger and steadfast in love, a God who never deserts, a God who brings life to that which seems lifeless. Speak, Ezekiel, speak that faith truth to these bones! And with those words and God’s ruah or breath or Spirit, the foot bone connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone to the shine bone, the knee bone to the thigh bone and so on until finally all the bones were connected, bodies covered with sinew and muscle and then, more words and more breath and those bones that were now bodies could walk and then, ‘Speak again Ezeikiel’; more words and more breath and the walking dead that were now alive once again knew the Lord.

The vision of Ezekiel has the Spirit of the Lord covering the entire valley of bones and bringing them back to life. It’s a vision given for a people who have lost heart; who are suffering a death of spirit. As one author wrote, “God broke into the cemetery of the dead community to inspire, bringing the spirit in order to prompt new life.”

The people are saying “God is not here. God has abandoned us.” To this Ezekiel says, “Let me tell you about this dream I just had.”

The people are saying, “There is no hope. We may as well be dead.” To this Ezekiel says, “Let me tell you about this vision I just had.” Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around!

Ezekiel’s vision is an exclamation mark on a faith statement; that God not only gives life but restores life; that death will not have the last word; even when all signs of life have been taken away.

It’s almost as if, two weeks away from Easter, we have been given an Easter teaser as to what is to come. We’re in these final days of Lent with one final wilderness test; where will we rest our hope, where will we set our minds in these days ahead?

In our faith story, we stand right now in the darkest time. Jesus’ face is set toward Jerusalem, we will be entering the gates next week with a parade and celebration, yes, but we know there are dark days ahead. Betrayal, pain, desertion, grief. But right before this next phase of the journey, we have been handed Ezekiel’s vision, a valley of dry bones come to life! That in the darkest places in our lives, there is still the possibility for God’s spirit to blow in and make dry bones dance!

Perhaps before we move to Easter’s celebration, our Lenten reflection for this day is to ask ourselves, “Where are the dry bones today? Where is the valley of death?” Perhaps for some of you, you are standing right in the middle of that valley right now. You feel that God has deserted you, you’re here but just not feeling it because your life seems like a big dead end of dry bones. Keep coming back until words spoken and Spirit touched you begin to see new life.

For the rest of us, we hold onto this story like a lifeline. We as people of faith, when we're in that place of doubting, in that place of spiritual death, we can remember back to the question asked, "Can these bones walk?" and the answer of faith given, "Not only can they walk, but they can dance!" We tuck this story away as food during those hungry spiritual times, when we find ourselves like the people of Israel not knowing where to hang our hope.

And there is a part II to this story. At least I heard that part II. Part I, we have a vision given to a desperate, downtrodden people that reconnects them – just like the foot one to the ankle bone – reconnect them to their God. Part I are words of comfort and words of hope to all of us when we find ourselves in those dark places. Part II? That word 'prophecy'.

Did you notice how in the vision, the Lord spoke to Ezekiel saying 'prophecy', speak to, tell them about your God, a God so very mighty in power and love, tell them about a God who has not deserted them! And it was only after Ezekiel prophesied that God's ruah or Spirit blew in and started those dry bones dancing. Three times God said, 'Prophecy' and each time the people who were dead inside came more to life until finally they were reconnected with their God.

Part I of this story is comfort. Part II is call. And God says to us, "Prophecy." Where are those dry bones today? Where is the valley of death that needs to hear promise of the living God?

A family member gets a fatal diagnosis and sees no light ahead. The homeless man doesn't seek shelter because his life is a dead end, in the bottom of a bottle. A trans teen is bullied and sees no future ahead and so contemplates the end. The refugee who has just fled bombing with her children, survived a boat trip across a dangerous sea, only to be stuck in an overcrowded, lifeless camp sees no hope ahead. The milienial looks out at the mess of both environment and political reality and shakes their head in despair, seeing only darkness ahead.

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.

And to the bones, God says 'prophecy'; where people stand as spiritually dead as dry bones, prophecy, speak to them your truth with a capital T; that God not only gives life but restores life, that death will not have the last word; that as down and out as they may seem, as hopeless as the situation may feel, when all signs of life are seemingly taken away, winter is always followed by Spring. Speak to them with words and actions, telling and showing them a God of care and compassion. Set the stage for God's ruah, God's breath, like a gentle warm spring breeze that comes in and melts the snow on the field for harvest, will blow in and make those dry bones dance!

Into winter's bleakness, Spring will come.

"Now the seeds beneath the dark earth stir with strength, life to be won."

Amen