

“THE VALLEY OF BONES”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” We have felt this in recent days. The disruption to our routines brought on by the pandemic is wearing many of us down in small ways and large. A trip to the grocery store has become an ordeal: movements circumscribed by arrows, social distancing, and trying to keep the mask on. Standing in line after spending 40 minutes gathering just a few things you start to feel warm and you don’t remember the store ever being this hot. This is trivial of course next to the person sitting in the ER without the friend or spouse they brought along for support; the person on a ventilator and their loved ones unable to provide an encouraging presence; the twenty-two million on unemployment; healthcare workers coming to terms with the reality that they are risking their lives to deliver care; factory workers hoping that the protocols will be enough to keep them safe; families and friends of the 113 million who have died. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

In the midst of all this, the nation is grappling with issues of racism. Janet and I went to First Methodist downtown for a prayer vigil the evening that the National Guard had barricaded Bronson Park. We could see seven armored vehicles and around 30 National Guard troops from the steps of the church. We were asked to leave by 6:30 so that we could all be inside by curfew. It was a quiet night, but in an eerie way not peaceful. Protests all across this country because the white authority has repeatedly refused to address the inequities that began with the colonization of this continent over 400 years ago: the slave trade justified by the belief that Africans were an inferior people whose lives could be improved by their white masters; the constitution that counted a slave as only three-fifths of a person; the emancipation that broke the chains of slavery, but could not guarantee respect or equity; the false witness against black men that led to mob violence and lynching of thousands; Jim Crow; Civil rights legislation too closely followed by assassinations of black leaders and a new Jim Crow; and today, a litany of black deaths culminating in the shocking video of the death of George Floyd. “Our bones are dried up....”

Maybe you’re among the many who are growing weary of all things “Covid” and the seemingly endless discussion around race. Maybe you’ve stopped watching the news, swapped NPR out for some wake-up music. Maybe you’re just getting ready to close down the livestream. Please don’t... because there is hope. There is good news coming. So hang in there with me while I talk first about a little more bad news.

The valley of bones is not just a consequence of disease, disaster, and injustice; it also represents a failure of faith. “The bones are the whole house of Israel.” Ezekiel is a prophet and a priest for the community of religious and political leaders taken into exile in the early sixth century BCE. For two hundred years Israel had been playing Babylonia to the east off against Egypt to the southwest and Assyria to the north in order to maintain

their independence. But for the last twenty years Israel has been a vassal nation governed essentially by Babylonia. At the turn of the century, Babylonia had taken some Israelites from Jerusalem to the rural area outside the city of Babylon. There they were allowed to form communities and practice their faith.

Isaiah and numerous other prophets attribute this disaster to Israel's failure to follow God. They failed in executing justice for the poor. They failed to be wholly devoted to their God and strayed to the worship of false gods. But the community in exile is still trying when news of the ultimate disaster comes. The temple in Jerusalem is destroyed. Their faith to this point revolved around the temple. To imagine the swirl of emotions when this happened, think about your own feelings when the twin towers fell in New York. "Our bones are dried up...."

I heard Rev. Dr. Anna Carter Florence preach on this text several weeks ago. She outlined three sermons from the text and the first stops here in the valley of the bones. We are too quick to move on to resurrection before we have understood the bones. The church has been too quick, she said, to move on to hope before it has properly grieved.

The text opens with the hand of the Lord leading Ezekiel around and around and around the valley filled up with bones, bones that are dry, bones without the marrow, bones that have been that way for a long time. And if Ezekiel doesn't understand about the bones, God tells him: "These bones are the whole house of Israel." The bones are not about the oppressor nations. They have nothing to do with Babylonia, Egypt or Assyria. They have been in the valley for a long time. They are bones without marrow, bones that have lost their soul, bones without faith. The community has failed to practice faith, failed to follow the leading of the spirit, failed to receive the breath of God

Our bones are dried up. There is no temple to go back to. There is no going back. I've heard more sermons about what's wrong with the church since before I went to seminary than I care to think about. And every single one of them spends a little bit of time on the problem and moves quickly on to the solution. The church needs to be more savvy about advertising. The church needs to just preach the gospel and stay out of social justice issues. The church needs to engage more young people. The church needs to more open to change. It needs to knock on doors, do theology in the pub, be more intentional about feeding the hungry. There's nothing wrong with much of this, but if it doesn't look more closely at the bones, it doesn't quite understand.

The church's problem isn't demographic - too many old people and not enough young people. It isn't economic - not enough money to pay the pastor. I don't even want to be one of those people who are saying what's wrong with the church. It's not about any one individual or any one congregation. We all have shortcomings and failures. And it may be that we aren't even in this valley of dry bones. But it feels like we are, like maybe we've lost a piece of soul.

I feel like we haven't loved our neighbor as well as we might, loved one another as Jesus loves us. I feel like we've feared the stranger rather than becoming a community that

welcomes the stranger, like we prefer our own wisdom to the teaching of Jesus. I'm not suggesting that we aren't trying; no more than the community of Israel in exile wasn't trying. It's hard, after all, to keep the fear operative in the world around us out of the community of faith. We're human and so we're afraid. But faith teaches us to love, not fear.

It's hard to breathe in a world that values vengeance above forgiveness, that encourages tribalism, that rewards personal achievement over the welfare of communities, that teaches independence over connection.

The Lord asks Ezekiel if these bones can live. If you haven't walked around the valley and taken a good look, you might give the wrong answer. You might mistake optimism for faith. But faith leaves the "knowing" up to God. Faith waits for God to give direction.

The news is good for Israel, by which I mean the faith, not the nation. Most scholars believe that the core of what Judaism would become was formed in this period of their history. The people of Israel become a community of faith, a community not dependent on buildings or places. The people of Israel grew flesh and muscle and received the breath of life that continues to breathe in them to the present day.

I don't know if the church is in one of these valleys of bones. I see a lot that should concern us, our participation in the history of racism, our judgment of people with differing sexual orientations and identities, our stifling of the voices of women just to name a few. But maybe the crisis in which we find ourselves will call us back to the core of our faith. Maybe God will speak a word to us through the prophet.

Dry bones don't grow flesh, but God has done the impossible before. These are difficult times, but they are not uncertain times as we are so used to hearing. We know what breathing looks like and what not breathing looks like. We may be a community in exile, but we have been instructed in what a living and breathing faith looks like. It is certain that learning to love our neighbor, all our neighbors better, will redeem a life. It is certain loving one another as Jesus loves us will bind us together in community. It is certain that loving our enemies is the only way to make them a friend. It is certain that seeing the image of God in all people will enable us to truly see them. It is certain that compassion and empathy build community. To breathe is to feed the hungry. To breathe is to respect the earth. It is certain that the church needs to take a big breath right now and speak the wind of the Spirit into a broken and divided world.

These are difficult times, but it may be that God is breathing new life into the church, that God is calling us to return to the marrow of our faith that gives life to the bones. Come Holy Spirit, Come. Amen.