

## **“CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”**

John 11:17-26; Ezekiel 37:1-14

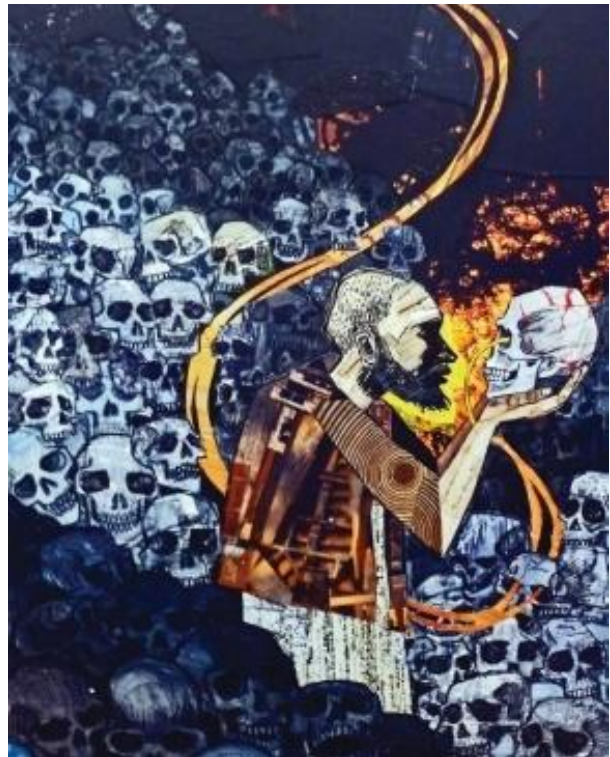
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Rev. Jerry Duggins

When we were planning this series a couple months ago, we came across a painting by Frank May called *Mourning at Mineral Springs*. We found it in a multi-volume work called *Imaging the Word*. In the center of the painting is a full human skeleton laid out. At the foot and head of the skeleton are creatures that appear to be coyotes and one is howling. Underneath the picture is a commentary by biblical scholar, Christopher Seitz. “Exile is death.” He writes, “It is a valley where all the prophet can see are bones, where he alone has eyes to see and hear the question too horrible to be answered except by God, ‘Can these bones live?’ [God], you know.’ The place of exile is not just the north country, or a new Egypt, or the regions around the earth’s boundaries... It is as cold and final as the tomb, where no breath is drawn.... Yes, Israel is totally dead.... The valley is full of bones, and all are very dry. Not one shows any sign of stirring by its own effort. The prophet sees a wasteland, still, lifeless, and all encompassing” (p.165).

The mixed media work that you see on the screen, composed essentially of scraps of paper, is not by Frank May. Alas, I was not able to locate a copy that could be reproduced, but I wanted to start with May’s piece and Seitz’s comment because they capture the context for Ezekiel’s vision. Israel is in exile from its homeland. A dry and dangerous wilderness, a desert, separates them from the land where they came to know God. Their temple, where they worshipped, is destroyed. “Exile is death.” There were certainly some in Babylon, prisoners in a foreign land, who had lost all hope, who felt as though they were already dead.

To such a people, the question, “Can these bones live?” must seem the height of insensitivity. Ezekiel can’t even bring himself to answer. “God, only you know; because there is no faith, no hope left here.”



I’ve never known this kind of despair, but it’s not uncommon. The world’s oppressed know it. Gazans are wondering if these bones can live. Hostages are wondering if these bones can live. Wherever there is war, there are people wondering if these bones can live. Refugees stuck in camps are wondering, as are victims of violence, racism, and sexism across the globe. There are

so many peoples whose despair has driven them that low that I find the global situation very disheartening and with Ezekiel I feel like I have to answer: "God, only you know."

Cody Miller says about his art: "My pieces are about hope, not necessarily in a bright way, but in a way that reveals the hidden fingerprint of God, letting us know, 'I was here all along.'" John Kohan in a 2021 [January 27] article in *The Christian Century* writes about the art you see on the screen: "In a pose that plays off the graveyard soliloquy scene in *Hamlet*, the prophet delivers God's call to new life to just one of the many dead in this charnel heap, suggesting that collective renewal begins with transformed individuals."

If we're going to find hope in the face of the gloomy state of the world, a little humor and stepping away from the big picture to something more concrete could prove productive. Maybe it's just me, but I kind of find it funny to imagine Ezekiel talking to the now dead Yorick pondering his existence as he mutters, "To be or not to be...." I couldn't see it when I first looked at the picture, but it did look strangely familiar. By the way, if you're looking for bizarre biblical art, you won't find anything odder than Ezekiel.

Hamlet's issues are of course far removed from Israel's, but they are both dealing with an existential issue. Hamlet's a little earlier in the process wondering whether it would be better to go on or not. Israel has already suffered a kind of death and now God is posing the question to Ezekiel whether a new life might be possible, whether these bones can be made to live again. The short answer is: "Yes!" Those of you who have been in Bible Study with me already know that Judaism as we know it today was born in the exile. Faith shifts from being centered around the temple to being nurtured in the synagogue. The scriptures previously built around several oral traditions begin to be codified in books. The ritual acts of sacrifice become secondary to the teachings of the faith. Can these bones live? You see the answer in Miller's art in the form of a red stream representing the wind, the breath of life as it passes through the prophet sparking a flame in the skull not unlike the tongues of flame at Pentecost.

Can these bones live? We see little resurrections all the time. When loved ones die, we celebrate their life in a service even though we are grieving the loss. And that celebration becomes a foundation for building a new relationship. We don't have the hugs and the physical presence, but we learn to hold them in our heart and as we do so, we become different persons, better people for having known them and even better in our remembering of them.

Can these bones live? Plantation owners tried to break the will of their slaves, gave them a truncated Bible that reinforced their subservience to white people, and broke up their families attempting to destroy whatever solidarity they might latch on to; but they built networks of support, never stopped longing for freedom, and lived a faith more authentic than their owners. Can these bones live? Just ask Booker T. Washington, Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Can these bones live? Some of you lost family during the pandemic or you experienced a new level of isolation; but because we focused on caring for one another, we stayed safe, got

vaccinated if we could, found new ways of communicating, and discovered new passions for justice, spirituality, and mission.

Can these bones live? Some people continue to worry about declining numbers in the church. Churches in the Presbytery merging and others closing, fewer ministers coming out of seminary, and many of them looking for less traditional ministries. Churches are certainly facing great challenges: exercising compassion in a world that values it less and less; feeding the hungry and sheltering the unhoused in a society that provides fewer resources for these ministries; being kind to the earth in a business climate that views it as no more than a commodity; being there for people in a world that is more and more intent on abandoning them.

Can these bones live? To the obsession that parts of our world seem to have with death, I can only say with Ezekiel, "God, only you know." But we haven't forgotten about the stranger here. We're still feeding hungry people and offering shelter to those without a roof. We are still standing by those in grief and ministering to the sick among us. We are still nurturing faith in people from cradle to grave. We haven't grown weary in prayer and we lift up a pretty credible voice in praise to God. Take a deep breath. The spirit is dancing. Amen! By the grace of God, these bones can and will live! Amen.