

Dance, Bones, Dance!
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
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Ezekiel 37: 1-14

I don't know what it is that has caused my mid-Advent slump but everywhere I look I see dry bones.

In places around the world where human rights and dignities are under threat, I see bones that are very dry.

In our own country, that can't seem to have many civil conversations about important matters, I see bones that are very dry.

In our hometowns, where our schools struggle for resources and our churches struggle for justice and peace, I see bones that are very dry.

It doesn't matter which direction we look—toward the environment or politics or the economy or world affairs or our own personal lives—it seems like despair is pretty much in charge.

Perhaps it is true that the world is going to hell in a hand basket like my grandmother used to say. We can buy that. Joblessness, wildfires, mass shootings, the demise of venerated institutions—seems like it's all going to hell in a hand basket.

Whatever it is that's going on, Ezekiel and I seem to be occupying the same head space. And so the LORD is addressing me as well, I suppose: "Mortal, can these bones live?"

My despairing self replies, "Reckon not."

My feisty self replies, "How the heck would I know?" which I think is pretty much what Ezekiel is saying only more enigmatically and politely.

But my hopeful self says, "I have so many questions. Do exiles have a future? Do people who have been shut out have any hope of restoration? Will the earth live on for the generations that come after us? Will wars ever cease? Will I ever see my grandmothers again?"

Tell me, Ezekiel! Tell me the story again. Remind me, so that I can trust that dry bones might live. And so with you I watch this scene in the valley play yet again. David read it beautifully. God tells Ezekiel what is going to happen. These dry bones will live.

The scene is wonderful, really: femurs rattling and skulls grinning with all that wind (ruach!) and flying dust. And not a bit of it is reasonable or rational. Like 'The Nightmare Before Christmas' it's this fantastic, loopy affirmation of imagination and conviction.

And I get it; I do get it... I get that the power of life belongs to God and only to God.

I get that my questions are not questions for human response; only God can answer them.

I get that life is animation—it is the wind, the breath, the words that blow hair and move muscle and restore power. That life is about bodies and land and physical reality, not just disembodied spirit. I get it!

And I get that the life God promises Ezekiel is a public reality, a historical reality, a political reality. It's an exiled people's return home. It's any exiled community's renewed participation in the life of physical and political power.

Can victims of war and natural disasters, victims of greed and prejudice, victims of unemployment and sexism and homophobia participate in the power of public life again?

God's answer is "Yes! I will bring you all up from the graves of war and natural disasters, the graves of greed and prejudice, of unemployment and injustice and you shall live! And I will place you on your own soil!"

I will place you—the displaced refugee, the homeless victim of a hurricane, the wounded and ravaged war victim, the dis-empowered sufferer of abuse, the under-employed retail worker — I will place you on your own soil.

That soil may be the shelter of a house or the plot of land on which to grow your crops or the legislature in which to make just laws or the job from which to feed your family. But that soil is the platform, the anchor from which you can affect things.

We remember this scene for its drama and cadence, its visual power. We remember it for its conviction in God's faithfulness. We remember it for its bravado and for the scandal of embodying the universal truth of God's sovereignty in one particular story.

"Prophecy over these bones," the LORD commands Ezekiel, "and something that is not supposed to happen will happen; the normal pattern of things will get up-ended. Death will become life."

Believing that death can become life is a belief against all odds. Expecting a normal pattern to give way to a different future is a fool's errand.

Yet that's our calling and God's promise, isn't it? Not that we keep doing business as usual, but instead that we seek – and expect – and even DEMAND – something to be different. Ezekiel prophesied to dead bones, and they impossibly came to life. Jesus commanded the dead Lazarus to "come out" of his tomb, and he did, still wrapped in his burial cloths. Jesus fed over 5000 people with an one kid's lunch supply ... and had plenty left over.

We're going to see this again in two weeks when we gather around a manger – a feeding trough for farm animals – where God himself, the Savior of the World, comes to us as a vulnerable child born in a stable to an unwed teenage mother. This is part of God's business of upending the normal, of going against all odds, of unsettling the status quo.

If I'm honest I think this is all pretty unnerving. If I'm a dead dry bone, maybe I like it that way. I've lived a good life, and am now settled in a dry valley for eternity. Why rattle me and reconnect me and make me into something again ... something that could hurt and die once again?

Why show me that the impossible is possible when it seems that all too often the impossible remains impossible?

There's so much risk in all of this. It just sounds like a terrible idea. Staying dead, keeping quiet and to ourselves is so much safer.

But keeping quiet is not our calling.

Following Jesus – even to the cross and the empty grave – is our calling.

Daring to speak words of life in a valley of death is our calling.

Allowing ourselves get stirred up into new life is our calling.

Going to a manger to worship with foreigners, peasants, and stinky animals is our calling.

Sharing what we have so that others may also have is our calling.

Our calling is scary, yes, for it demands that we leave some things behind.

We must leave behind the security of knowing which way is up.

We must leave behind the confidence that what is dead stays dead.

We must leave behind and refuse to play the zero sum game that regulates us with the law of finitude.

We are called forward into God's agenda of upending the normal where the lowly are highly exalted. We are called forward into God's agenda where those who lose life gain it. We are called forward into God's agenda where those who give receive.

Maybe what we're supposed to do is tell the story of Ezekiel standing in the middle of death and remember that God has made promises to our human turmoil before. Standing here, I don't really know how any of this will end. What I do know is that there are dry seasons of defeat and despair.

But... we also have these loopy stories of God standing outside the logical conclusions, knitting bone to bone to sinew to flesh to skin to breath.

What we have witnesses is that restoration is possible, God's sovereignty is visible, and Love always wins. Some call that... Advent.

So I try to imagine the vision... a multitude of dry bones rattling to find one another. And I think... whose bones are they?

The young man whose only family is his gang?

The young woman who cuts her forearm just to feel the pain in her life?

The single mom with two jobs and two kids and maybe two bucks in her wallet at the end of the week?

The middle aged man struggling with depression and anxiety?

The elderly woman whose mind betrays her with dementia?

The lonely, the aged, the unemployed, the sick, the despairing, the addicted, the bones of the has-beens and never-beens, so very dried up...

Imagine these dried up cast away piles of calcium rattling to find one another. Sinews come next... I connect to you. You help move that one sitting next to you. That one holds onto the next one. This one strengthens the other one. I want to be part of the pile.

The word continues, the life giving prophetic word - speaking wholeness, completeness, healing, shalom. Peace. Salaam. Muscles tie them together, so that they know they are connected. Like what happens when old friends come home, or new friends are made, or loved ones are embraced, or those we have forgotten remembered.

And as the multitude settles into this newly connected body, skin wraps around them. An organic natural shield, a protective layer. Miraculously regenerative. Waterproof. Amazingly resilient yet stunningly fragile and vulnerable.

But there is still one thing is needed: The breath. The Spirit. The wind of God. Can you hear it? Can you feel it? Do you perceive it?

That rattle? That beat of life? That whisper of wind that shapes a chorus?

Or maybe a dance? That says there is nothing dead here.

A promise is being brought together.

The old words find new life.

The prophet's song is being sung again.

New life is on its way.

So Dance, Bones. Dance! Amen.