

Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Psalm 130

Roans 8:6-11  
John 11:1-45

Ezekiel's vision of dry bones is one of the most imaginatively dramatic readings in all of Scripture. Here Ezekiel is transported to a valley and there are dry bones as far as one could see. Ezekiel makes sure that we know that the bones were dry. Dry bones emphasizes death. This passage is the source of the well-known spiritual song, "Dem Bones." It starts out with, "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones," and continues with various bones connected to other bones.

This vision of dry bones was a description of what Israel was experiencing. It was a time of death for Israel. Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians. Their beloved capitol destroyed. The center of their faith, their Temple, destroyed. Many of the Israelites were forced to move to the strange land of Babylon to live as exiles. Living in a strange land among a strange people. Ezekiel, who was both a priest and a prophet, was one of those exiles. This valley of dry bones was indicative of the exiles condition. Ezekiel witnesses the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones.

There are so many exiles today. We are witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record. There are 65.3 million forcibly displaced people worldwide today. Among them are nearly 21.3 million refugees, over half of whom are under the age of 18. There are also 10 million stateless people, people who have been denied a nationality and access to basic rights such as education, healthcare, employment, and freedom of movement. 34,000 people are forcibly displaced every day as a result of conflict or persecution.

There are many people in the world experiencing other kinds of exile. There are many whose lives wither, and are as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. Those denied the resources they need to live whole, healthy lives: food, a roof over their heads, denied access to healthcare and education. There are those who are facing chronic illnesses or death, and those who grieve. Gang slayings and drug wars. Those who are addicted to drugs or pornography. Those suffering from mental illness or other forms of personal demons. Just as God had a special concern for the poor, the vulnerable, the disenfranchised, so we too are to have a special concern for them.

When I was in college, I took zoology my first semester. When my parents came down to visit one weekend, I was showing them around the college. We went into Thompson Hall, the science building, and went into the zoology lab. In that lab there was a skeleton in a closet. I opened the door and pulled the skeleton out of the closet, and told them that his was a young female. When my mother discovered it was a real skeleton, I never saw her move so fast! She did not like seeing those dry bones. Just as these dry bones upset and bothered my mother, we too should be bothered and upset by all the dry bones in the world today.

The Christian life is a material life. In our reading from Romans we read, "Setting our mind on the Spirit." As seminary professor at one of our Presbyterian seminaries points out, this is not an attempt to put our bodies to the side somehow and concentrate on the inner life of faith. Paul's contrast between Spirit and flesh in this passage is not to be understood as a contrast between the soul and body or between spirituality and sensuality. "Life 'in the Spirit' refers, among other things, to a way of conducting a bodily life: it is manifested in how we use our physical energies and our material resources,

how we care for our neighbors and our planet. When ‘the spirit of God dwells in [us], our corporeal lives, in all their concreteness and messiness, become expressions and instruments of God’s grace and peace.’”

As Christians, we are to be as concerned about people’s physical state just as we are about their spiritual state. Salvation means more than just our spiritual state. The word “to save” in the Bible can mean saved as we think about it in the spiritual stated, such as “are you saved?” The same word also translates “wholeness,” “flourishing,” “healing,” and “well-being.” For example, when the Israelites were trapped between the Red Sea before them and Pharaoh’s army behind them, Moses announced, “Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today....” Moses struck the Red Sea, the waters divided, and the Israelites were saved. The Greek word “to save,” “sozo,” can be translated as being saved spiritually, as when Jesus said, “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” But it can also be translated “to heal.” For example, in Mark, we read that the crowds begged Jesus that “they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” Salvation refers to being saved spiritually and to flourishing, well-being, and wholeness. Someone has suggested that salvation in terms of having a personal relationship with God, and salvation referring to flourishing in this life refer to two wings of a bird. That bird cannot fly if she does not have both wings. The church’s ministry is that of spiritual wholeness, and physical, social, mental, and emotional wholeness. People are to experience flourishing and well-being. This is God’s will.

That is why during this season of Lent we should be concerned about changing the socio-political context of distress, of destroying any impediment to flourishing and

well-being. Traditionally Lent is thought of as a time for us to reflect on our inner selves, to see where we should be making changes, to think about where do we need to repent. To change anything that impedes our relationship to God. It is just as legitimate to consider whatever in our society impedes others flourishing and experiencing well-being.

As Jan Schnell Rippentrop a Lutheran seminary professor, reminds us, “many systemic concerns in this world—poverty, racism, and ageism, to name a few—cut people dead, which means that they are recognized but their presence is not acknowledged. The disenfranchised, the vulnerable, are like Ezekiel’s dead bones. The way that systems cut people dead is a concern for us and the church. It silences and makes invisible many individuals and populations. Dr. Rippentrop declares we need to ask, Who is missing from public discourse? Who has this society made silent or invisible? How can those who have been silenced be heard? People are questioning whether our politicians are listening. Be it in town hall meetings, emails, phone calls, letters, are our leaders and politicians really listening to us. They are hearing, but are they listening? If they are not listening to us, they certainly are not listening to those who have been cut dead! Are they listening to the disenfranchised, the vulnerable. Or are they listening to the rich and the powerful?

How can we, as a community of faith, as a church, as the people of God, how can we transform people’s stories, from being silenced to being heard, from being ignored and cut dead to visible and valued, from being dead to flourishing and full of meaning and well-being? That is salvation!

Hosanna in the highest!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Amen.