

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?
5th Sunday in Lent (Year A)
March 26, 2023 – Richard L. Ullman

In the presence of Death: Life.
In the presence of Death: Life.

Here stands Ezdkiel, in the middle of a valley filled with dry bones. “Can these bones live?”

Here comes Jesus, into the cave where his beloved friend Lazarus lies dead. “Lazarus, come out!”

The Lazarus story is so compelling, so intimate. “Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus”. Lazarus is dead. His sisters’ grief is Jesus’ grief — “Jesus wept”. As have we all, and shall we all again — Jesus wept..

The Valley of Dry Bones is on another scale altogether. Think of scenes of mass devastation, whether warfare in Ukraine, earthquakes in Turkey, famine in Sudan, tornadoes in Mississippi. At such a place we stand with Ezekiel, stunned into silence — silence beyond weeping.

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Before he was a prophet, Ezekiel was a priest, ministering in the Temple in Jerusalem. But his beloved city fell in deadly warfare. King and court and all who dwelt therein were marched long desert miles into exile in Babylon, Ezekiel among them.

Like Ukrainian reugees fleeing Mariuopol, Soledar, or Bakhmut, they took with them what little they could. One of the treasures to survive the exile journey was the songbook from the Temple. Their captors goaded them to sing from their songbook. But they could not. Instead they wrote a new psalm, which survives today as Psalm 137...

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept,
when we remembered you, O Zion.
As for our harps, we hung them up
on trees in the midst of that land...
How shall we sing the LORD’S song
upon an alien soil?
— Psalm 137:1,2,4

I like to imagine that Ezekiel was reciting these poignant verses when his mind wandered back to the beginning of exile. Though a dozen years had passed, it is all vividly present. The siege. The extreme hunger. The long march with bloody feet, empty bellies, crying children, moaning elders. Especially vivid in memory is valley they passed through where a great battle had been fought and which was left full of the bones of the soldiers slain there.

Those dry bones become a vision of all that was lost. The cry that rises from deep in his heart becomes for Ezekiel the voice of God: “Mortal, can these bones live?” (Ezekiel 37:3)

Ezekiel cries out in a despair unhappily too widely shared: “O Lord God, *you* know.” (Ezekiel 37:4)

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Dry Bone Valleys abound. Ezekiel's moment 2600 years ago is as close to us as this morning's news reports. In the presence of all manner of devastation, small and large, with Ezekiel we wonder if the bones can live.

An elegant, gracious friend, rich in years, drifts into senility and finally must be placed in a Memory center, where elegance gives way to fear, loneliness, and weakness that is unfortunately not strong enough to bring death. Dry bones.

A talented, faithful, fine young husband and father loses his job, and can't now begin to make ends meet on the profit-optimizing pay he gets from the only work he can find. Dry bones.

A medical exam leads on to tests that yield a devastating diagnosis. Dry bones.

A beloved pastor retires, new people start doing things in different ways with different styles. The streets don't seem safe any more. Prices rise and incomes seem to shrink. Divisions deepen and trust, truth and candor seem ever harder to find. Little seems the same as it was only a few days or months or years ago. Dry bones. Dry bones. Dry bones.

Mortal, can these bones live?
O Lord God, you know

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At this moment in his vision, God commands Ezekiel,

Prophecy to these bones, and say to them:
O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...
I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.
I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live.
— Ezekiel 37:4-5

So Ezekiel *does* prophesy, and “suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh, ...but no breath.” (Ezekiel 37:7)

Even the most visionary, the most faithful, the most godly obedient among us cannot of our own bring breath to the dry bones in the valleys of our lives. Not Ezekiel. Not the most gifted among you. Certainly not I! The best we can do of our own powers is something akin to the mortician's art: “doesn't he look natural, lying there?” And that we accomplish only with a noise, a rattling, a great commotion.

Then God says to Ezekiel, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: ...‘O Breath, breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’” (Ezekiel 37:9)

Breath. The Hebrew word is *Ruach*. It means wind, breath, spirit. In the beginning, the breath, the wind, the spirit of God hovers over the water in the midst of chaos (Genesis 1:2). In the beginning, God formed the human being out of the very dust of the soil to which all our dry bones shall return. Then God made the human thing a living being by breathing, inspiriting into our nostrils, that, having spirit, we might have life (Genesis 2:7).

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It is God's breath that gives life. When Ezekiel prophesied to the wind, the spirit, the breath, "the breath came into [the dead creatures of the Valley of Dry Bones], and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." (Ezekiel 37:10)

That multitude of life was as vast as the grief of the Jews in Babylon, as vast as those afflicted by earthquake, famine and war. The vast multitude of life reaches out to embrace every other dry bone in the Valley.

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Before his glorious vision ended, God gave yet one more word to Ezekiel: "Prophecy to the whole house of Israel: ...O my people, I will put my spirit—my wind, my breath within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil." (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

It did happen, of course. After Exile came Return. After death, life.

This is God's pattern, a pattern repeated in the ministry of Jesus – the story of Lazarus is one Sign of it. Again and again: *Dry Bones*, plus *Spirit*, equals *Life*.

Without God's *Ruach*—God's Wind, Spirit, Breath, we are all dry bones. Separated from God's Breath, we are death. The Apostle Paul knew the pattern, both from his own studies and from his life. He put it this way in this morning's Second Reading:

To set the mind on the flesh is death,
but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

— Romans 8:6

Exile, Return. Death, Resurrection. Cross, Crown. That's God's pattern. Memorize it. Expect it. Depend on it.

Can these bones live? Yes. By God's breath – and by God's breath alone – they shall live:

O my people, I will put my spirit within you,
and you shall live.

In every valley, pray for the wind of God. Pray for it, and then, for God's sake, do not seek shelter from it when God's breath blows! For only in the wind is life, the same Life who is Resurrection, commanding the Lazarus in each of us to venture forth. (John 11:25, 43)

To the glory of God.
Amen.