

June 2, 2013



Twice Told Tales:
“CAN THESE BONES LIVE?”

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Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel looks out over a deserted valley filled with dry bones, like the week-old carcass of the Thanksgiving turkey, and the question echoes through the valley and through his soul: “*Can these bones live?*”

The same question looms in the dry valleys of some of our churches, doesn't it? Annual Conferences meeting across the country will continue to report an overall decline in membership in United Methodist Church in the United States. Once-great cathedrals of Europe sit silent, now little more than museum pieces and grand sanctuaries of their central cities. *Can these bones live?*

For many of us, it is a personal question. Economic upheaval and downsizing leave us searching and uncertain. Families have recently walked through the valley of the shadow of death. Desert places of our lives are filled with the bleached bones of broken promises, broken dreams, broken marriages, and broken relationships. *Can these bones live?*

Even in the depths of our souls, perhaps there is nothing left but the dry bones of a once-strong personal faith, now barren and hollow. *Can these bones live?*

The year is 596 BC. The place is Jerusalem. The invading Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, has besieged the city. Eighteen-year-old King Jehoiachim has only been on the throne for three months. There were high hopes for the young king, but now even he has been taken prisoner and hauled off to Babylon with thousands of Hebrews. It is a dark day, indeed. Because of their high hopes for the vigorous young king, many believed it would be a short occupation, that the Babylonians would be overthrown and the throne of Israel restored. But Ezekiel knew better. Ezekiel knew the journey would be a long, difficult one.

Moreover, Ezekiel believed he could see God's hand in it all. He believed God was at work even in the tragedies of human history, calling his people to genuine confession, honest repentance, deepening faith, and firmer trust. Chapter after chapter, he tells it as he sees it with word pictures and images of destruction and judgment. It's downright depressing!

Finally, God takes him to the valley of dry bones, to a scene of utter desolation; a barren desert battlefield covered with the skeletons of soldiers who died in battle, bones picked clean by buzzards and bleached in the blaze of the Middle Eastern sun. It's an image right out of one of

the “disaster” movies...or Afghanistan or Africa...or Iraq or Syria...or our abandoned inner cities...or our neglected inner souls. It’s the valley of dry bones.

I suppose we’ve all spent some time in that valley, haven’t we? The valley of shattered hopes and broken dreams; the valley of grief and loss; the valley of spiritual emptiness, what the ancient saints called the “dark night of the soul,” when our relationship with God seems at best, distant, and at worst, non-existent. I’ve been through the valley of dry bones, haven’t you? I hate to admit it, but I’ve even seen some dry bones in church! I’ve seen lifeless congregations who have lost a sense of mission and vitality; stale, sterile worship where no one really expects to come into contact with the living God. Ezekiel looks over the valley and cries out, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost!”

BUT...right here, in the darkest hour...

At the very depth of the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel hears the word of hope. God’s voice thunders across the plain and asks the question, “Can these bones live?” It is God who asks the question, and Ezekiel is smart enough to know when to keep his mouth shut, so he says, “O Lord God, Thou knowest.” Again God speaks, but instead of giving Ezekiel an answer, God gives Ezekiel a task:

“Ezekiel, go and preach to these dry bones.”

If there is to be an answer to the question, it will involve Ezekiel. If there is to be hope for the future, Ezekiel will have to do his part. You see, God’s answer often involves a calling and a task. God’s answer usually involves you and me.

I heard a campus minister from a university church tell the story of a young college student who was trying to make sense of his world—poverty in our cities, suffering in Africa, war in the Middle East, the undercurrent of racism and prejudice in our society. The student walked into the college chapel, looked up at the crucifix, shook his fist and cried out: “God, look at this world. Even I could make a better world than this.” And in that moment of despair, he heard God say, “That’s exactly what I had in mind.” If there is to be an answer, if there is to be life in the valley of dry bones, it will involve you and me.

As you know, for more than a decade I have been involved with the Methodist church in Estonia and the Baltic Methodist Theological Seminary. Today Estonia has fewer people who profess any kind of faith than any other country in the world except for the Czech Republic. One of my friends says trying to plant the church in Estonia is like trying to carve a church out of solid granite.

A few years ago at the graduation ceremonies at the Baltic Seminary, then-Bishop Olsen told of a church under construction. The pastor happened to live in a house attached to the church, and every day he and his little son would watch the progress on the project. When the day of dedication came, the pastor stood on the steps of the new church and said, “Look what God has done!” And his son piped up, “Daddy, God didn’t do this, the workmen did! I saw them.”

Then Bishop Olsen asked, “Who do you think was right, the preacher or the son? Was it God or was it the workmen? My guess,” he said, “is they are both right. When God goes about building his kingdom, he does it through people like us.”

So Ezekiel went and began to preach to the dry bones.

And my guess is (no, my experience as a preacher tells me) that he wasn't the last preacher to feel like he was preaching to a valley of dry bones! He wasn't the last preacher who wondered if it would do any good. But he went ahead and did it anyway: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Behold, I will lay flesh upon you and put breath in you, and you shall live.”

And my guess is (no, my experience as a preacher tells me) that ole Ezekiel was shocked out of his socks when something actually happened. He writes: “So I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I prophesied there was a noise, and behold, a rattling...and the bones came together, bone to bone.”

I know it sounds spooky, like something right out of Harry Potter. But listen, can you hear it? Those old bones began to snap, crackle and pop as they pulled themselves together—clicking and clacking around in the valley. The classic Fred Waring arrangement of the old jubilant spiritual tells it best. (You just knew this was coming, right?)

The toe bone connected to the heel bone,
The heel bone connected to the foot bone,
The foot bone connected to the leg bone,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around,
Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

The bones clatter and clack and come together. Muscles and tendons and flesh and blood swell around them and there was hope and the potential for new life in the valley of dry bones.

And when, like Ezekiel, God's people hear the challenge and begin to preach to the dry bones, when God's people come together in mission, when we get serious about the work of building the kingdom in the world, when God's wind-blown, sun-scorched, dried-out, bony skeleton of a church rises up in a desire to live and proclaim the Word, its simply amazing what God can do.

A second time, God tells Ezekiel to preach, this time to the wind: “Preach to the wind, come and breathe on them that they may live.”

In the Hebrew, it's a play on words which is repeated several times throughout scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. In Hebrew the word *Ruah* can mean breath, wind or spirit. It's the word used in the poetry of the Genesis hymn of creation to describe the Spirit of God which moved upon the waters of the deep. It's the word used in Acts to describe the Holy Spirit which breathed at Pentecost when fire came down and the church was born. Preach to the *Ruah* and the wind blows, God breathes, the Spirit comes, and there is new life in the valley of dry bones.

All Ezekiel's preaching couldn't have done it alone.

All his hard work at organizing the bones, like so many church committees, couldn't have made it happen. Even if the Detroit Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church had passed a strategic plan for biblically-based bone assembly and ecclesiological cartilage reconstruction, that wouldn't have been enough. It was only when the Spirit came and breathed through his words and his work that the valley came to life.

And for all that you and I may do for the Lord—all our hard work, our time and talents, our preaching and pie baking and committee sitting—as important as our work is, it is only when we allow the fresh wind of God's Spirit to breathe through the valleys of our lives that new life comes to the dry bones.

And just look at how many times we have seen it happen in the life of this church.

Just look at the number of times we have been engaged in mission and service, work and outreach, building and teaching, and in the midst of the going and the doing, God's Spirit breaks in and something amazing happens: new life, even in the valley of dry bones.

Revival in the church and renewal of our souls will not come without our commitment, our hard work. But when God's Spirit breaks in, when the Spirit breathes through us, a new day of Pentecost can come.

“O my people,” says the Lord, “I will bring you home. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.” O Lord of Wind, Breath, Spirit, come from the four winds and breathe on us. Use us in your service so that these dry bones can live. Let Pentecost happen again.