

“The Warning and the Promise”
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Ezekiel 37:1-14

The valley of dry bones is one of the most startling and gruesome images in the Bible, and to understand why God gave Ezekiel this vision – how those bones got there, and what they mean – we need to know the context, the background. So, in 587 B.C., a Babylonian army marched westward, conquered a small kingdom without much trouble, ransacked the great Temple of Jerusalem for treasure, destroyed it, and then took most of the people back East with them to serve as slaves. For the Israelites, it was the end of the world as they knew it. As a people whose entire identity was rooted in the liberating story of the Exodus from Egypt, they must have wondered how this could have possibly happened. They must have wondered why God would abandon them to this terrible fate.

Prior to that time, there were plenty of prophets, like Ezekiel, who warned people what was going to happen, but few listened to them, until those awful prophetic predictions became reality. Then people paid attention to what they once ignored and finally honored a wisdom they once ridiculed. They remembered the prophecies and took them to heart. The oracles of God helped make sense of the chaos and tragedy their lives had become.

As the Israelites reconsidered the warnings of Ezekiel and others, they realized that their plight was not despite God’s best efforts. Instead, their conquest and exile occurred *because* of God’s best efforts. It was punishment, a sort of awful cosmic object lesson, intended to wake them up and bring them to repentance and a renewed rightness of life.

Now we might be tempted to regard this as a situation where people just suffered the natural consequences of their foolish choices, and sometimes, that is the case. But in *this* case,

the prophets make clear God's intentional and direct agency in the historical event of the conquest and exile. This may make God look wrathful and vengeful, but we cannot fathom the depths of God's mercy and love, if we don't also have an awareness and appreciation of His divine justice and righteousness. God wants what's best for us, and God knows what's best for us better than we do. Getting us to understand this, though, can take radical measures on God's part.

Well before the conquest, Israel had lost its integrity as a nation. No longer faithful to the God who had given them so much, they worshipped the false idols of their neighbors, hedging their bets, if you will, and in the process forsaking their covenant connection with God. Idolatry was a major complaint of the prophets, and none spoke against it more forcefully than Ezekiel, the only biblical prophet who also served as a priest at the Temple.

The collapse of the covenant brought about by idolatry led people into all the wrong ways. Economic injustice was a huge problem. Inequality was rife. People weren't playing fair. The rich and the powerful exploited their advantages to control people. The kingly court and the courts of justice were both corrupt. Great violence erupted. Even something as basic as honoring the Sabbath went by the wayside, driven to the margins by the greed of those who put profits over people.

The result was defeat and enslavement, vividly symbolized by the valley of dry bones. Then as now, the proper burial of the dead was very important. The idea of simply leaving bodies out in the open was horrifying. The valley of dry bones symbolizes death and destruction, but also disgrace and exposure, abandonment. The valley brings to mind a battlefield where the dishonor was so great or the rout so severe that no one bothered to dispose of the dead with dignity.

Yet God brought Ezekiel to witness this awful spectacle in the valley to offer a promise, to give hope that the disconnection between God and his chosen people would not be permanent, but that God would reconnect what had fallen apart and once again breathe life into a nation that had overwhelmingly chosen sin and death. The scattered bones lying on the valley floor, representing Israel, would be reassembled, the creative force of the people restored and the covenant renewed. This good news makes clear that God is faithful, even when we are not, and though we often suffer the consequences of our faithless choices, God will redeem us, despite our undeserving.

We would do well to heed the prophecy of Ezekiel and others like him, because the prophecies that held true for the Israelites remain relevant to us today: as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a nation. Our landscape is littered with dry bones. The sense of disconnection from God and one another is so great. Rare is the person today who offers sacrifices of blood and grain to stone statues, but idolatry still runs rampant, as we make various things a higher priority than the sacred covenant we share with God. We do this by devoting our time, energy, and resources to pursuits that may be worthy, but which cannot compare to a faithful relationship with God, which too often we leave neglected for pursuing our ambitions or mere entertainment.

We live in a world where economic inequality is extreme, where people cheat and break laws both secular and sacred to get ahead, and when caught they only regret that that they weren't clever enough to avoid detection. While we are blessed with many good and faithful public servants, overall our government is corrupt, beholden to a caste of moneyed elites who prize power so much that they forget to fear God and sometimes act as if they are gods, capricious and proud. The prevailing attitude in our world is might makes right, so violence

abounds. There's so much of it going around – in places like Syria, South Sudan, and just thirty minutes across town – we hardly notice, much less care, until it happens in our own neighborhood, as it tragically did last week just down the road. Is it any wonder that we live in a fearful age, in an anxious age full of enmity and strife; an age of such great disconnection that more and more people feel isolated, lonely, cut off; an age when more and more refuse to believe that God could possibly exist?

Yet prophecy always contains a balance of problem and promise. God wants to put us back to together again. God wants to provide us continuity in an ever-changing world. God wants to breathe life into people smothered by a world that glorifies death and destruction, and how we respond to God's initiative is crucial.

Will we put God first, not just when it's convenient but all of the time, or will we keep our priorities pretty much the same? Will we speak out and act against injustice, or stay on the sidelines, avoiding the risk, meek and complacent? Will we listen to the prophetic word or wait until disaster strikes before we pay attention? These questions are easy to answer, but the answers are hard to put into practice.

However, when we lack the wisdom and power to act rightly, God gives grace to those ready to receive it, ready to allow God's transformative power to work through us in the world. God gives us grace, even before we even ask for it. So the crucial question is, are we ready for God to turn our lives around? Are we ready for God to reconnect us, to breathe new life into us, or do we want our bones and the bones of others to stay on the valley floor: severed and disconnected, bleached dry? We have choices to make, and we have been warned. Amen.