

The fifth Sunday in Lent
Can these bones live?
(Ezekiel 37:1-14)

Dry bones

Sometime this week I was talking to Pastor Juan and told him that I was going to preach on Ezekiel's dry bones. That big Montes smile lit up his face. "Oh," he said, "that's a Pentecostal passage. Are you going to preach like a Pentecostal?" So we got a laugh out of that imagining my bones rattling, arms shaking, and voice rising and falling, me preaching about Holy Spirit power revving up our dry bones...or imagining whatever your stereotype is of "Pentecostal" preaching!

But actually, truth be told, I do believe in the empowering, enabling Holy Spirit, mysteriously dwelling within young dreamers and old codgers, those whose bones are brittle and those whose bones are flexible—inspiring us to live in radically faithful, upside-down, genuinely kingdom kinds of ways. Yes, we can, and yes we will, with God, the source of our being, as our help.

And for sure you don't have to be Pentecostal to preach about dry bones. I don't want to sound arrogant but I think I know something, in a literal way, about dry bones.

Chad in the early 1970s

Some of you know that the dry Sahel of Africa was the setting for critical shaping experiences in my life. I lived in Chad, Africa from 1973-1975. That's a long time ago and I can look back on those years now and wonder, was that really me? But it was me and I know I wouldn't be the same person standing here if it weren't for those days.

I spent time in those years travelling and working in dry, desert conditions. This was the Sahel, the vague undefined swath of north-central Africa, the setting for the slowly advancing Sahara desert. I remember seeing uprooted trees, flipped upside-down, the result of lack of moisture and winds sweeping across the desert landscape. And I saw carcasses and bones too. The bones of sheep and goats, cows and camels—all victims of the Sahel drought back in those years. There they were, fields of bones, a few flies buzzing around the decaying body parts, and the bones, slowly drying under the hot sun.

I did not see dead people but I did see plenty of desperate people. They were refugees, often nomadic folks who gravitated from their more stable homes in the far reaches of the desert to towns and cities, where they congregated in camps around the outskirts of the town. They put all their belongings under a makeshift roof of tin, cardboard, and animal skin, shading a sand floor of about eight by ten feet.

I quickly got conditioned to all this to where I could walk amidst through a scene of human misery with a good measure of detached objectivity. But when I stopped long enough to think about what was going on the question came to me, the same question I still have, how is it that I, just an ordinary twenty-five year old guy, can be here and have it so good, while through sheer accident of birth all these people I see must be resigned to living here, staying here, in this field of dry bones?

With this passage it's important to linger for awhile and really take in the dry bones all around us.

Ezekiel's vision and the world we live in

Ezekiel's vision didn't just fall out of the sky. The book of Ezekiel as a whole reflects a lot of desperation, hopelessness, and doom. It's a sometimes dark and certainly convoluted book. It's not easy to read or get your head around.

Ezekiel himself, writing in the early 6th century BC, has been taken into Babylonian captivity. He has some kind of priestly standing. He's feeling the loss and hopelessness of any refugee people, forced to live far from the places they love and call home. While under siege his people experienced torture, disease, and lack of food. The temple was wiped out and people were killed. He's learned too that some of the religious institutions he's been part of have grown corrupt. And then on a more personal note, Ezekiel's wife died. Ezekiel saw death and despair all around him.

All this suffering lies behind his vision of a field of dry bones. All around him he sees the evidence of loss and death. In his vision it stretches out as far as he can see. All he can see are dry bones. There is no hope. Then the prophet hears the voice of the Lord saying "O mortal, can these bones live?" All he can say is, meekly, "Oh Lord God, you know."

This passage is ultimately hopeful but before we get there it's important to contemplate why there are so many dry bones around us, and how did they get there?

This week I opened up my New Yorker magazine to find a piece on the all-too-common practice of targeting killings in Guatemala. Then I went to the county jail this week to see a fellow here in town I've learned to know who put me on his visitation list. Holding the phone in my left hand, writing a few notes with my right, staring through the glass trying to match his intense, desperate gaze, while seeing other prisoners in their all-orange prison garb behind him--made me think about Ezekiel's field of dry bones. I know some of you are learning all you can about some of the fancy footwork performed by tax attorneys allowing some major U.S. corporations to escape paying taxes. It's all legal, of course, but does that make it fair, much less right? These problems seem so overwhelming we probably can't do much better in responding to the question "can these bones live?" then a faint "O God, maybe you know," while whispering under our breath, "I don't see how."

Last summer in Ashland, Oregon Glenna and I took in a modern American play, Ruined. It's set in a bar/brothel in the Congo. It wasn't exactly pleasant to watch, this dramatic portrayal that draws you into the hell of pillage and rape, greed and the horror of war. More dry bones. Then this week my friend Tim's most recent essay from the Congo appeared. He recalls a scene from Kibumba in eastern Congo, where on an October night in 1996 Rwandan forces and Congolese rebels attacked a refugee camp, destroying a hospital, killing many, and sending some 200,000 refugees fleeing into the jungle where many would die of "natural" causes in the ensuing months and years.

Now today this place of abject horror and suffering as turned peaceful and green. Tim remembered what American poet Carl Sandburg wrote:

*Pile the bodies high at Austerlitz and Waterloo.
Shovel them under and let me work –
I am the grass; I cover all.*

And pile them high at Gettysburg

*And pile them high at Ypres and Verdun.
Shovel them under and let me work.
Two years, ten years, and passengers ask the conductor:*

*What place is this?
Where are we now?*

*I am the grass.
Let me work.*

We need to work too, like the grass. Not in the sense of covering up, but more like the grass absorbing and drawing into ourselves, into our souls and spirits, the pain and the anguish of the dry bones beneath our feet and all about us.

Rattle them bones

After Ezekiel takes in the scene around him he receives the word of the Lord to prophesy to the dry bones. Soon sinews and flesh start to grow on the bones, and then they begin to rattle and shake. Ezekiel prophesies again and calls for the four winds to blow and bring breath into the bodies. In his vision Ezekiel sees a whole congregation, no, a whole people beginning to form in front of him. Rattle them bones. And maybe he imagines those decaying religious institutions of his own people taking on new life. Rattle them bones. He catches a vision of his own people taking on new life and form in foreign Babylon. Rattle them bones. And he dreams of the day when they return to home in the city of Jerusalem. Rattle them bones. And he dares to dream the glorious vision of his wife, beautiful as ever, calling to him to not lose hope and to never let go of love. Rattle them bones.

And we too can to dream as well looking out onto the dry bones in our own homes and families, our communities and our world. We too can imagine that institutions of greed and oppression will someday be transformed into agencies of help and hope. Rattle them bones. And when we imagine that folks we know now mired in the jails of our land might someday be productive citizens. Rattle them bones. We can dream that people now mired in the thick web of unpaid bills, immigration uncertainties, and unplanned pregnancies might continue to struggle hard and continue to rise above their circumstances. Rattle them bones. We can envision a budget that dares to take seriously those who have no voice. Rattle them bones. And we envision the mighty breath of the Lord blowing from the four winds saying bring your soldiers home from those far way distant lands. Rattle them bones. And when we feel ourselves wandering in a desert-like wasteland of spiritual barrenness. Rattle them bones.

Amen.

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