

## Can These Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Acts 2:1-21

“The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. . . . He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’”

On the Friday before this Pentecost Sunday, my only prayer for the Holy Spirit was “Come! Here! Now!” How many Fridays have Austin or Brian or I started to write a sermon only to be stopped in our tracks by breaking news, by the heartbreaking, mind-numbing, soul-wrenching news of yet another mass shooting?

Reading and rereading Ezekiel that day, I found myself walking through the valley of dry bones that is our common life, listening to Scripture as though God’s question to Ezekiel were God’s question to God’s scattered people in this nation: “Can these bones live?” Likewise, reading and rereading the story of Pentecost that day, I realized that the subject before us continues to be death and resurrection: not our personal death and resurrection but the death and resurrection of God’s people. Both stories invite us into the life of God’s people at a moment in time when something is ending and something new is about to begin. Yet we know this ending and beginning in our own lives together as, year after year, we trace the life cycle of God’s people liturgically from birth and call, to formation and adventure, to stability and arrival, to decline and testing and finally death and resurrection.

The first story is a story of the decline and testing, of death and the promised resurrection of God’s chosen people Israel. The time is the sixth century B.C. The Babylonian Empire has carried the elite ruling class of Judah into exile while leaving the poor in the rubble of a destroyed temple and city and Davidic dynasty. Ezekiel was a prophet both to the exiles in Babylon, where he had been taken into exile himself, and to those who remained in the land of Judah. After prophesying doom and judgment for most of the book, Ezekiel finally offers a word of hope to God’s people who are as good as dead. In his vision, the Lord sets Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley full of dry bones, bones so dry and scattered that not even the semblance of a skeleton remains. “Can these bones live,” God asks and Ezekiel responds, in essence, “You tell me, Lord.”

The vision, at first, appears to be a new creation story. Just as God formed a-dam from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and a-dam became a living being, so God’s word, spoken to these scattered bones, promises to create life out of “things that are not”: “I will cause flesh to come upon you. . . and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” Suddenly Ezekiel hears bones rattle and sees skin begin to cover the bones, but the body is still lifeless. “Prophecy to the breath,” God says. “Say to the four winds, ‘Breathe, O breath, upon these slain, that they may live.’” Then the breath of God comes into them and they live and stand on their feet, a vast multitude.

It is only then that God tells Ezekiel the dry bones are the whole house of Israel, are God’s scattered people, living in Babylon and Egypt and all the places mentioned in the Pentecost story. They are so scattered as to have no discernable body. What started out as a creation story now becomes a story about God’s resurrection of Israel as a living body. “I am going to open your graves, O my people,” says the Lord, “. . . and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.” Sixty years after the exile, some do return to the land. They rebuild the temple and double-down on their obedience to God. Yet the breath, the spirit is missing, according to Robert Jenson who reads Scripture as one plotted story and so reads Ezekiel through the lens of Pentecost. With the majority of God’s people still scattered throughout the Empire, it was as though the reassembled body would wait and pray for centuries, asking God to breathe God’s spirit into the community. The story of God’s chosen people was and continues to be a cliff-hanger!

Now the second story also reads at first like a story of birth and call, but listen carefully because it doubles as a story of death and resurrection. On the day that Jesus ascends to be seen no more, the eleven ask him a question that seems to pick up where Ezekiel left off: “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Is this when you will breathe life into your people? Can these bones live? Jesus tells them to wait and pray in Jerusalem for the power of the Holy Spirit to come upon them—for God to put God’s spirit in them so that they will live. Again, it is what Israel had been doing for centuries. Ten days later, Jerusalem is filled with Jews from the diaspora, the descendants of those who had never returned. They had come for the spring barley festival known as Pentecost. Yet Luke is writing this story sometime after 70 A.D. when the temple again had been destroyed and God’s scattered people were dealing once more with the death of the community. Remember that gentiles are not yet in the picture. This is a story that continues Ezekiel’s story of death and resurrection.

With all of God's people returned to the land for Pentecost, the time had come for God's breath to come into them, for God to put God's spirit within them so that they may live. Because God's dwelling place on earth lay in ruins, at Pentecost God's Spirit takes up residency within and among God's people. For those who receive the Spirit, the story is a story of death and resurrection in the waters of baptism.

From that day in Jerusalem, when three thousand were baptized as either the nascent church or God's chosen, Spirit-filled, resurrected people at Pentecost, to the fertile or fatal marriage of Greco-Roman culture with the gospel under Constantine, to the long, drawn-out divorce between culture and religion that has been happening in the West since the Enlightenment, from that day until this, God's Spirit has continued to birth and call God's people, to form and accompany God's people, to stabilize and refresh God's people, to judge and test God's people, to bury and raise God's people from death to new life.

Yet reading and rereading Ezekiel on Friday, walking through the valley of dry bones that is our divided and divisive common life, I found myself wondering how in the world these bones, the bones of God's scattered people in this nation can live, can come to life in the midst of so much death, can actually bear witness to the love that is stronger than death in ways that not only change people but change the world?

On days like Friday, when I let death have dominion, I despair. I imagine the church being stuck where Israel was stuck in Ezekiel's time. God may indeed be picking up her scattered pieces, assembling the skeleton, putting sinew and flesh and skin on her bare bones. That is to say, from a human point of view, organized religion may put the processes and procedures in place (the skeleton), may get some new people to be part of the structure (the sinew and flesh and skin), may jumpstart new programs, reorder the worship service (maybe add the peace), and renovate the building so that the people who show up on Sunday morning at least look like the body. But, as Ezekiel said to God, there is no breath in them, no life, no animating power, no spirit. The church is simply an organization going nowhere in a world going nowhere unless the Spirit of the God who promised to open the graves of God's people in the sixth century B.C. and the same God who raised Jesus from the dead in the first century A.D., should dwell within God's people again in the twenty-first century: birthing and calling, forming and accompanying, stabilizing and refreshing, judging and testing, burying and raising the church to new life. That was Friday.

Then Saturday dawned and, in spite of my dreary captivity to death and sin the day before, I rose early for the Royal Wedding. As Dave Holmes gushed in *Esquire*, "...we expected tradition. Stiff British upper lips. Fascinator's. We did not expect to be taken to *church*. But I'll be damned if The Most Reverend Michael Curry...didn't take us right there." For the most part, the Brits stiff upper lips became stiffer, their bodies frozen in time, their faces visibly dead to the animating breath of the Spirit flowing freely and joyously and passionately through this preacher. As for me, somehow in those few brief shining moments, watching the Spirit within this man defy the death all around him, the death that had hold of me gave way to the love that is stronger than death. I repeat, it was Saturday, the day after death's dominion on Friday, the day when Jesus harrowed hell, broke down the door to Hades and resurrected the whole company of the dead, beginning with a-dam, the day when Christ redeemed the community that is God's people for love's sake. "When love is the way, there's plenty good room—plenty good room—for all God's children. When love is the way, we actually treat each other like we are actually family. When love is the way, we know that God is the source of us all. We are brothers and sisters, children of God: that's a new heaven, a new earth, a new world, a new human family."

"At this point in history," Holmes concludes, "when the world seems to be getting crueler by the minute, an impassioned plea for self-sacrifice, a call for a life centered on love for one's neighbor, is exactly what we need to be hearing....we have got to start loving one another....Now," Holmes ends, "you'll excuse me, I am going to join the Episcopal Church."

On this Pentecost Sunday, with arms outstretched and hands vulnerably beseeching the heavens, let this congregation's only prayer be gratitude for the Holy Spirit who continues to "Come! Here! Now!" and make these bones live. Thanks be to God!