

*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...*

Clearly this was not going to be a normal morning for Ezekiel. Well, for Ezekiel, maybe, but... It seems to go with the territory when you are a prophet. Now in this vision of Ezekiel's I like to imagine that all of this rattling around might have taken place in the pre-dawn hours. That in his vision Ezekiel is set down in an early-morning mist when the heaviness of the night is just starting to lift, and everything is absolutely still. In this pre-dawn gray he is just barely able to make out the contours of the valley, whose shape is defined by the silhouettes of a vast multitude of bones. But that's ok if he can't see them. He doesn't have to. Ezekiel is no stranger to bones. He knows all about bones. And he knows these bones.

You see, Ezekiel was a prophet to the people of Israel during perhaps the lowest point in their history. Three and a half centuries had passed since the glorious reigns of David and Solomon. In that time this kingdom of God's chosen had suffered division into northern and southern kingdoms. The Northern Kingdom of Israel was completely destroyed by the Assyrians. The Southern Kingdom of Judah survived the Assyrians and the Egyptians. But by the time Ezekiel began to prophesy Judah had been overthrown by the Babylonians. The elite of Judah, those in positions of power and authority, were taken captive into Babylon. Ezekiel, as a priest in the Temple in Jerusalem, was among those taken into exile. Eventually the city of Jerusalem and the Temple were completely destroyed. The House of Israel was scattered, decimated, and driven off of their promised land. And Ezekiel found himself prophet to this shattered and desiccated vestige of what had once been glorious. Oh yeah, Ezekiel knows all about bones.

And so in his vision, in this early morning twilight, Ezekiel begins to walk around, in and out among these dry bones. Now this kind of a stroll was dicey business, especially for a priest. As you may recall, the codes of holiness in the law did not allow for a man or woman to come into contact with a dead body. Such contact would make one ceremonially unclean, unfit to be in the company of others or God. So Ezekiel's walk was a little tricky. I mean, you don't get more dead than a pile of bones.

What an incredible sight for Ezekiel to behold. You see, when Ezekiel was called to be a prophet at the opening of this book he was bound hand and foot, made mute except to recite the words of God, and imprisoned in his house. He remained in this condition for thirty chapters in the book of Ezekiel. Only after he receives word that Jerusalem has fallen is Ezekiel freed from his bonds and is able to speak again. His emancipation occurs just before today's passage. So this little journey to the valley of the dry bones is Ezekiel's first outing in quite some time. This vision of a landscape of bones, the first thing that he sees, is a visual verification of all that he feared has come to pass. Israel's glory lay slain, dismembered and made unclean by their rebellion against God. He must have felt a sense of profound sadness, bordering on despair. Yet Ezekiel – just before having this vision – receives words of consolation from the Lord. He hears words of reconciliation. So perhaps this jarring confrontation with the calamity that had befallen Israel created in Ezekiel a sense of anticipation that in spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, there might still be room for hope.

Then God asks him the question. Oh, the question. God posits the question that Ezekiel must have had on his lips as he walked among the bones. The question God asks contains both the despair of those living in the midst of overwhelming hopelessness, as well as the hope of those living in the midst of a promise yet unfulfilled. God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

All Ezekiel can say is a response framed by the same mix of despair and hope: “O Lord God, you know.”

Fortunately God does not keep Ezekiel in suspense very long. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to these bones who say, “we are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” – that they will live. And indeed the bones that were scattered come together, their unclean surfaces covered and made new with flesh and skin. Breath enters them and they live.

But so much more than mere breath enters them. The Hebrew word for breath – “ruach” – means much more than simply air. “Ruach” is the creative wind of God. “Ruach” moved across the formless void at creation. God breathed “ruach” into Adam. And “ruach” dried the face of the flooded earth, inviting Noah and his family to partake in a new creation. “Ruach” parted the Red Sea, leading Moses and his followers from enslavement into new life. This “ruach,” this creative spirit of God enters this symbolic graveyard of the chosen people of God in the pre-dawn twilight, yet again extending an invitation to participate in a new creation.

It is easy, as Christians, to misinterpret this passage as a prophetic metaphor for the Second Coming of Christ. But to do so does a great disservice to Ezekiel and us. Through Ezekiel God was calling the house of Israel – and is calling us – to new life here and now, to become the people of God in this world. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a more fitting passage for us to chew on as we approach Holy Week. The season of Lent transports us – if we dare to allow it – to our own valleys filled with bones. Even in the best of times the bones are there. And in the bad times we can’t seem to take a step without becoming contaminated by them. We too know a thing or two about bones. And if we dare to walk amongst the broken relationships, the sorrowed pasts, the unforgiving and unforgiven bones of anger and contempt we can easily become overwhelmed. It may feel much safer to be bound hand and foot, mute, imprisoned in a home of denial. But that really is not where God would have us. The valleys of dry bones in our lives are meant to be transformed and God wants us there doing that work. The purpose of Lent and Holy Week is not to punish ourselves. The purpose of this season is to locate the deserts within ourselves and strive to bring them to bloom, to put flesh on our dry bones. “Out of the depths I call,” the psalmist sings, because we know we cannot do this transformation alone. To enliven dry bones is an act of creation. To heal what we call broken, to breathe life into dead relationships, to reconcile what we consider hopeless is the work of a love far beyond ours to command. We must call upon “ruach” – the creative breath of God. The bones will stir. The dryness of hatred and contempt will be quenched by the life-giving blood of mercy and compassion revealed to us in Jesus Christ. The calcified unyielding of pride will give way to the sinew and tendon of humility and forgiveness. All we have to do is be willing to walk our valley of dry bones and call upon the breath of God. It isn’t easy; it may be the hardest thing we humans can do, facing the true brokenness of ourselves and our world; but if we do, God’s grace and love will bring forth in us a new creation. Here. Now.

As we walk this valley of Lent, approaching the cross with humility and reverence, the invitation stands before us: the one offered to Adam and Eve, the one offered to Noah, the one offered to the exiled House of Israel. We are invited by God’s grace to participate in the new creation offered by Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. We are invited to live into the answer of the question, oh, the question: “Mortal, can these bones live?” By God’s grace and through God’s creating love, we can boldly respond, “O Lord God, you know. You know.”