

## Dem Dry Bones

It sounds as if, at some point in his life, Ezekiel had come across the site of a ferocious battle. Perhaps it was at Megiddo, where King Josiah of Judah had been defeated by the Egyptians in a famous battle that gives us our word Armageddon. Perhaps, given the efficiency of carrion-eaters, the battle had been more recent; perhaps even the revolt against the Babylonians led by Zedekiah that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. Perhaps it had been an older battle; Israel and Judah had been defeated by their enemies many, many times since the days of David and Solomon. There had been ample opportunities for a valley to be filled with the bones of fallen soldiers from among the Children of Israel.

Did Ezekiel see such a sight on his way from Jerusalem, where he had been a priest, to his own exile in Babylon, where he became a prophet? Was he allowed, perhaps even forced, to pause, to take in the horror of the carnage that must have been wrought in that place? Was he, a priest of Yahweh, purposefully marched through this charnel house of a valley by his enemies in order to render him ritually unclean, to add the final insult to the devastating injuries of seeing his nation destroyed, his wife killed, the Temple of the Lord burned to the ground? Was it then, in his grief and misery, that God gave him the vision of the nation restored or was it later, as he struggled to bring a word of consolation and hope to the exiled community in Babylon?

We will never know the answers to these questions but we can understand the emotional impact of the valley of dry bones all too well. We may not have trod the site of battle, where bones remain unburied, but we have seen the electronic visions of Darfur and Srebrenica, of Basra and of Buenos Aires, of Pol Pot's killing fields and of Hitler's "final solution." Less dramatically but closer to home, we have seen the dry bones of people's lives in shuttered storefronts and foreclosed homes. We know the dry bones of relationships shattered by addiction and infidelity, the dry bones of a nation in which red will not speak to blue and where the rainbow is seen as a symbol of political division rather than as a symbol of God's love for all, the dry bones of families of faith where bitter dispute over doctrine and practice have replaced lovingly bearing each others burdens. This weekend, I participated in a planning retreat for the Church Council of Greater Seattle, where we discussed how the ecumenical movement, once so vibrant, is looking suspiciously like dry bones, indeed how the denominational structures which have defined the human manifestation of the Body of Christ for centuries are turning into dry bones before our very eyes. All of us know once bustling houses of faith where the pews are now mostly inhabited by the shadows and whispers of the past. Dry bones, indeed. No, we do not need to have the experience of Ezekiel to understand that there are dry bones all around us and even in us.

Are we ourselves dry bones? If we are honest, I think the answer must be yes, at least some of the time. We have all known times of spiritual aridity, times when our hearts and souls as well as our bones, feel to us as dry as dust. Sometimes it seems as though God is a long way away. Sometimes it seems like years since we felt God's presence in our lives or that we've never truly felt the touch of God. Sometimes it feels like there is a wall between us and the people we care for most. Sometimes we wonder why the people and the experiences we have treasured most in life no longer burn as vividly in our hearts as they once did. Sometimes, as Miriam Winter's song said, our hearts are so lonely. Sometimes, all we need do is examine our own lives to understand the Valley of Dry Bones.

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But there is good news for us on this Pentecost morning. We sang of it when we first came together this morning. “There’s a sweet, sweet Spirit in this place... the Spirit of the Lord.” It is that same spirit that brooded over the deep, the depths of the void before the ignition of Creation. It is the same Spirit that the Psalmist reminds us creates all things bright and beautiful and renews the face of the earth. It is the same Spirit that gave life to humankind when “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living soul.” It is the same Spirit that Jesus promised would come and be our Comforter, our Advocate. It is the same Spirit that has called men and women for generations untold to follow the Way of the Lord, the same Spirit that has filled them with love and joy and peace and with fire, purifying, energizing, renewing and raising those dry, dry bones. It is the same Spirit that waits to fill us now, to fill us beyond a doubt that we have been revived when we shall leave this place.

You see, even when we are in the midst of the dry times, even when we feel that the strength of our bones is dried up and we are ready to crumble into dust, the Spirit hovers over us and in us and through us. Even when we feel that our tongues have cleaved to our jaws and we do not know how to pray, cannot possibly lift up a prayer to God that would express our needs and our fears and our hopes, even then the Spirit works on our behalf. Then, Paul wrote to the Romans, the Spirit prays for us, intercedes for us with groaning too deep for words. When we are spiritually inarticulate, emotionally illiterate, still the Spirit acts on our behalf. The Spirit knows what we truly need even when we do not, for that Holy Spirit that stands with us is the Spirit of God who made us, who knows us more intimately than we can even know ourselves. Like a loving parent with a child who cannot yet speak but only cry, God Godself interprets our needs and sees to them, though we ourselves cannot understand what to ask. God who heard the groaning of the Children of Israel in the brick pits of Egypt and remembered the covenants with their forebears, hears the Spirit groan on our behalf and remembers the promises of Jesus for us.

That is why, my sisters and my brothers, that even when we feel that we are as dried out as old bones left to bleach in the sun, that we have hope for life in abundance, life nourished with the Water of Life and the Bread of Life. “Thus says the Lord God: O my people, I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves... O my people, I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will put you in the place that has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.” The Lord has spoken and will act for the mighty works of our God are not all in the past. The mightiest works of God are yet to come! That is why we may hope for what we do not see, for God who made the heavens and the earth has promised us hope and the Spirit within us bears witness.

We may hope for ourselves, for new life when we feel we are nothing but dry bones and we may hope, too, for the transformation of the systems and the institutions that we humans have created. The vision God gave to Ezekiel was not simply of the renewal of a number of individual human lives but the renewal of a nation, the whole house of Israel. It was a nation founded on the faith of men and women who trusted God, Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, but it was a nation that had fallen away, turned to other gods, become corrupt. We have seen our institutions, too, even the best of them, founded in service of God or with Godly concepts at heart, become corrupted, fall away, lose their path. Those empty sanctuaries, those

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fading denominations, those splintering ecumenical groups, those organizations created for service and the common good – all, all can be renewed by the life-giving breath of God, if only we will live in hope and trust in the Spirit and her guidance. Our institutions may be radically altered as life comes back into them; indeed, they almost assuredly will be. But if we allow the Spirit to work in our dying systems to bring them back to the life God has planned for them, then they will be more authentically what we had hoped for them than we could ever have accomplished working on our own.

Indeed, the hope that the Spirit will blow across the dry bones of our world and bring new and abundant life is not just for us as individuals or a group, not just for our human-constructed systems and institutions, but for the whole of Creation. The South African theologian Lawrence Moore tells the story of the journalist who asked the great theologian Karl Barth near the end of his life what was the greatest truth he had discovered. With surprising simplicity, Barth replied, “Jesus loves me, this I know/for the Bible tells me so.” Barth went on to explain to the startled scribe, “Jesus loves “me” because he loves the world. I am saved because salvation is for the whole world! “I” am saved, not for my own personal enjoyment of salvation (important and wonderful though that is), but in order to become part of God’s mission of transforming all of created reality into the kingdom.” Creation groans as if in labor, waiting for our revealing as the Children of God, waiting to be set free from its bondage to decay. And just as hope comes to us as the Spirit works in our lives and just as hope comes to our works as we learn to work alongside the Spirit, so too hope comes to the Creation as we finally, through the teaching and praying and advocacy of the Spirit, become the stewards of Creation we were always meant to be.

A poet whose work I dearly love, Gerard Manly Hopkins, speaks of the hope for humankind and creation in his poem, “God’s Grandeur”:

THE WORLD is charged with the grandeur of God.  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

“Generations have trod, have trod, have trod...” On this Pentecost morning, we remember the fresh inbreaking of the Spirit of God into a world desperate for transformation, upon a group of women and men freshly bereft of the presence of Jesus who was God With Us. We should

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remember, too, our own earliest brush with the Spirit of God's power, the Holy Spirit who pulls us into the dance of love with the Father and the Son and all of Creation. But as Paul reminds us, that first coming of the Spirit into our lives is only the first fruit; still we wait for adoption, for the ultimate redemption of our bodies. Just as humankind has trod roughly upon creation for lifetime after lifetime, so the Beloved Community will take time to be fulfilled and we will face the passage of slow time before we reach our fulfillment. It is said that Martin Luther often repeated the words, "I am baptized," to remind himself of the ongoing work of salvation that God was accomplishing in his life. Robert Linthicum writes, "Salvation is a process, not a product, Paul teaches in this passage. Do not confuse conversion with salvation, the apostle suggests. Conversion may be a momentary decision when we determine to follow Christ and to work for his shalom kingdom. It may be for many an immediate decision. But the work of salvation in each of us is a lifetime work. The work of salvation to bring systems to the place that they truly embrace shalom with all of its implications may take a millennium. The work of salvation to transform the universe into God's creation may take millions of years. And it does not come easily! It is like the work of childbirth, the pain of labor that must have its time and must continue until the birth of the new has come! The work of salvation goes on – a process of transformation that cannot be rushed, but also cannot be stopped! We were saved. We are being saved. We will be saved!"

We are being saved. That mighty rush of wind and those dancing flames of Pentecost Sunday so long ago were simply the first manifestation of the life in the Spirit that comes to everyone who believes on the name of the Lord Jesus. But with the unfolding of our salvation, with the transformation of our lives that comes as we learn to heed more and more the movement of the Spirit in our lives, with that Holy Ghost-filled life comes power. The power of Pentecost is ours. The power to hope, to persevere, to bear witness to the mighty acts of God, the power even to participate in God's ongoing creation of the Beloved Community, this power is ours. On this Pentecost morning, in the Year of Our Lord 2009, let us pray for a fresh infusion of the power of Pentecost, a new filling with the Spirit of the Lord, so that the dry bones of our lives may be strengthened again, so that we would present to the world new and tender hearts full of hope and love, so that we would shine in the world with the fire of the Holy Spirit, who "over the bent World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings." Amen.