

December 10, 2017 – Advent 2

Ezekiel 37:1-14 - The Valley of Dry Bones

“Being and Bones” – Rev Seth D Jones ©

I am sure most of you have been around really intense people who want to know who you are. They set their fist on their chin and look uncomfortably into your eyes and look serious, then they say, “*Who are you?*”. Or, if they are being particularly annoying and difficult, they will say, “*Who is Seth Jones?*” Have any of you had this happen to you?

It is a horrible experience – at least for me. I don’t like questions like that, in part because I assume they need to pin me down and figure me out. The other reason I don’t like it is because “*Who are you?*” is a **being** question, and I am a good American and individualist and that is a question I ask myself, not one you get to ask me.

Questions of being are intensely deep and personal. Most of us, especially North Easterners, but also a lot of Minnesotans, are very private people. ‘*Being*’ is my thing, my question, and my concern. Not yours. That is because being questions go to our very bones. Who are we? What makes us who we are? What, finally, is the core of what makes a person *this person*?

This is why Ezekiel’s vision today is so visceral – it speaks to the depths of our being. But Ezekiel is also a prophet, and prophets are a little like those incredibly annoying people who set their fist on their chin and look uncomfortably into your eyes. Prophets are concerned about questions of being, about questions of the core of who we are.

As with our stories from the past few weeks, Ezekiel is speaking to the Israelites in the Babylonian exile. This vision today takes place after the Jews in Jerusalem rebelled in 587 BC. When they rebelled, the Babylonian armies leveled the city and deported the remain Jews to Babylon. Ezekiel was in that wave of refugees. By the time Ezekiel has this vision, the people’s only memory of Jerusalem is of a destroyed city and razed homeland. So, when we hear this vision of the valley of dry bones, we need to understand that, first and foremost, the valley is a metaphor for Jerusalem.

In the Bible, to refer to ‘bones’ is “*an idiomatic way of referring to one’s deepest self, or in the case of ‘our bones’, a way for a community to refer to its most essential self*”¹. Think, for instance, of what Adam says about Eve in Genesis 2:23:

“*This at last is the bone of my bones.*”

Or think of the lament Psalms and how they speak of suffering that shakes the depths of one’s being.

Psalm 22:14–15 (LEB)

*¹⁴ I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint.
My heart is like wax;
it is melted within me.*

¹ Commentary on Ezekiel 37:1-14 by Rolf Jacobson, Professor at Luther Seminary. Found at www.workingpreacher.com.

*¹⁵ My strength is dry like a potsherd,
and my tongue is sticking to my jaws;
and you have placed me in the dust of death.*

Or Psalm 6:2 (LEB)

*² Be gracious to me, O Yahweh, because I am feeble.
Heal me, O Yahweh, for my bones are terrified.*

Or Psalm 102:1–3 (LEB)

*¹ O Yahweh, hear my prayer,
and let my cry for help come to you.*

*² Do not hide your face from me
in the day of my trouble.*

Incline your ear to me.

In the day I call, answer me quickly,

*³ for my days vanish in smoke,
and my bones are charred like a hearth.*

These lament Psalms are all cries from the depths of a person's being. The valley of dry bones is a way of imagining the suffering of the people of God who have had to bear witness to the destruction of their temple and their homeland by a vast and violent empire. In Ezekiel's vision, God walks the prophet through the valley so he can observe this macabre display of the past. Then, God asks a question.

“Son of man, can these bones live?” (vs 3).

If the valley of dry bones is an image of Jerusalem and Judah destroyed, then it is also an image of the past. It is a way of imagining the past and thinking about where God's people have come from and what brought them here, to this place in time.

How do we deal with the past?

How do we understand difficult things that have happened?

What do we do with the trauma of communities and individuals alike?

Ezekiel's vision is a metaphor, a sign and symbol, of what has happened to his people. It is a disturbing image. Perhaps as disturbing is what happens next.

Ezekiel answers God, saying, *“Lord, you know”*, or in our way today, *“Lord, you are the one who would know the answer to that. I don't know and I don't have an answer for you.”* God calls Ezekiel to prophesy over the bones.

Ezekiel 37:7–8 (LEB)

⁷ And I prophesied just as I had been commanded, and there was a sound at my prophesying, and look! A rattling, and they came together—the bones! Bone to its bone! ⁸ And I looked, and

indeed, sinews were on them, and flesh went up, and skin covered over them upward, but breath was not in them.

Now, the valley floor is covered with en fleshed bodies with no life in them. At this point, we are in the middle of a George Romero zombie movie, or in a Stephen King novel. There is no life in these bodies.

But isn't this a way of describing how we sometimes deal with the past?

Don't we as churches and as individuals try to resuscitate dead ideas, memories from the past, the way things used to be, and drag them into the present moment?

But then they just lie there on the valley floor with no life in them. And the situation is only made worse.

This is not what God wants for us. This is not the being God wishes for us. God does not want to resuscitate us. No, God wants for us what God did for Jesus. God wants *resurrection* for us.

And for that to happen, God's *ruach* is required.

Ezekiel 37:9–10 (LEB)

9 And he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and you must say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord Yahweh from the four winds, 'Come, O spirit and breath, on these dead ones, so that they may live!'" ¹⁰ *And I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they became alive, and they stood on their feet, a very, very large group.*

The word *ruach*, in Hebrew, can mean 'spirit', as in *God's spirit moved across the waters* (Gen 1). It can also mean 'breath', as in *God breathed life into Adam* (Gen 2). And it can also mean 'wind', as in *from the four winds* in our reading today. This whole passage is playing on each of the meanings of *ruach*. *Ruach* is what gives life – the breath of life, the spirit of life. *Ruach* takes the things of the past and resurrects them. The spirit of God doesn't just bring things back to life; the breath of God transforms and changes everything.

In a resurrection, there are resonances, echoes of the past, remembrances, but the new thing is radically different enough that we might not even recognize the transformed moment in front of us - like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, when she mistakes Jesus for the gardener; or when the disciples do not recognize Jesus on the road to Emmaus. The past is present, and yet completely changed.

Advent can be difficult. When I was a kid, I anticipated Christmas. Advent was a time to get excited about Santa and gifts and trees and Rudolph. Anticipation and excitement change, though, as we get older. Now, anticipation and excitement are as much warning signals for me as they are signs of good things to come. Events of my past have overwhelmed my confidence in a good future. Maybe this is because I like the past better than I like the present.

It is kind of like the sign we see when we drive into Maine. It says, "*The way life should be*". But for a lot of people *the way life should be* becomes what it *shouldn't be* because of what we thought it *would be*. And now the life that could have been, isn't. It is like the breath has been sucked out of life and relationships, and the past becomes like a valley of dry bones and all our attempts to resuscitate it just makes a mall full of zombies. Zombies are, in our modern world, I think the symbol for a past that should have died, but won't.

Most of us, because of the stories we tell, know Advent will alter the past, transform us, and then present us with an unknown future. The anticipation of that future is tinged with what we thought things were – the way life was. That anticipation confronts what we think we want – *the way life*

should be. Then the breath, the wind, the spirit of God falls upon us and we get a glimpse, a life-giving moment, of *the way life could be.* A life infused with the resurrecting breath and spirit of God.

The valley of the dry bones is a vision of dramatic change and transformation, but the ongoing presence of God makes itself known in small ways as well. Once we have come up off the valley floor and the graves have been opened, and we are walking on familiar soil again, what tells us that God's *ruach* is still with us?

I like to think of God's presence, this resurrection breath, as a soft light that can be easily hidden by the weight of the past, the anticipation of the present, and the fear of the future. Our faith work and life, especially in a time like Advent, is to seek out that soft light, and to let it transform us.

When we lived in Montana, there was a man that was more or less a hermit. His name was Carl. Carl never went into any of the restaurants in the village and he never made his presence known. I never found out where he lived. Sometimes, though, Carl would drive by in his 1974 Ford pickup. He was small and clutched the wheel at 10 and 2 in a death grip. For months, he would drive by us while we were walking the dogs and, while we would wave and smile, he would never acknowledge us. I am certain he knew who we were, because hermits have a way of knowing everything that is going on around them.

Then, at the beginning of our last summer there, we were once again walking along Hwy 212 with our dogs. Carl drove by, and as he drove by, he raised his index finger in a farmer's hello. We were silent and wide-eyed as he drove by. We went into town and told Jan, who ran Buns and Beds, what had happened. Leo, who cooks all day behind the stove, stopped what he was doing and said, "*Carl did what?*" For everyone there, it was like the soft light of God's *ruach* shined just a little brighter. A past that we thought defined who we were in relationship to another person was transformed by a single event and it brought hope into a future none of us can ever know, but it is a future tinged with this soft light, this resurrection spirit.

So today, the Prophet Ezekiel is that annoying friend who makes us incredibly uncomfortable by staring into our eyes and asks us, "*Who are you?*" In that question, we see our past and realize, and know that our being is not defined by that valley of dry bones. In that question, we see our present and realize that we are not just a lifeless body driven by material needs. And in that question, we realize that we, like the people Ezekiel spoke to all those years ago, are transformed and completely changed by the spirit of God, a spirit which declares

Ezekiel 37:14 (LEB)

¹⁴ And I will put my breath into you so that you may live, and I will cause you to rest on your soil, and you will know that I, Yahweh, I have spoken, and I will act!" ' /declares/ Yahweh."

And you, O people of God, O Advent people, O resurrection people, live into the soft light of a Christ-like future.

Amen.