

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The book of Ezekiel, is ascribed to Ezekiel, son of Buzi, priest and prophet. He was raised in Jerusalem in a priestly family and lived with the Jews in Babylon during the exile. Ezekiel probably did not write the whole book, but it represents his visions, prophecies, and symbolic acts.

The “valley of dry bones” is almost certainly the most beloved and well-known of Ezekiel’s visions. The vividness of its imagery, the wonder of its unfolding narrative, and visceral appeal of its symbolism endow it with an appeal that even an uninitiated reader can engage with this story. And yet, the story becomes even more powerful when the reader learns something about its historical context, literary background and theological symbolism.

This vision dates back to the period of Israel’s history known as the “Babylonian Exile.” In 597 BCE, the armies of Babylon forced the capitulation of the rebellious city Jerusalem and deported the Judean king and many Judean leaders to Babylon. Ten years later after Jerusalem rebelled once again, the Babylonians razed Jerusalem and its temple and deported a second wave of its citizens.

Among the first wave of the deported was the young Ezekiel whom God later called in Babylon to the office of prophet. For those deportees forced to live in Babylon, the future seemed like a black hole into which they were destined to disappear. A century-and-a-half previously, many citizens of Judah’s sister kingdom Israel had been similarly deported, had lost their identity, and had faded into the

mists of history - the so-called lost tribes of Israel. The exile was more than just a crisis of physical suffering and communal identity. It also called for a crisis of faith.

The key symbols of Judean faith - Jerusalem, its temple, its people and the Davidic monarchy, had been destroyed. According to the theological rationality of the ancient world, many exiled Judeans assumed that their deity had been defeated by a stronger deity from Babylon. So the people wondered if the Lord was truly faithful after all.

Like earlier prophets, Ezekiel understands this disaster not simply as the unfortunate result of Babylon's empire-building. To him, since nothing can happen unless God allows it, Judah's people and especially their leaders brought this devastation upon themselves by their disobedience to God.

The reference to "bones" in this story is an idiomatic way of referring to one's deepest self, or in the case of "our bones," a way for the community to refer to its most essential self. When Adam, in search of a partner finally finds Eve, he cries, "This at last is bone of my bone." Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones is both a poetic and prophetic response to the situation of God's people - to their sense of hopelessness, to their being cut off from their land, their temple, and - they think! - from their God. The people use a common idiom of their time - dry bones - to express their helplessness and hopelessness. They lament, "Our bones are dried up."

Prophets were messengers sent from God. At times, the prophets were sent

with messages of judgment, calls to repentance, and admonitions to obedience. At other times, as is the case with Ezekiel, the prophets were sent with good news. Ezekiel's good news comes with this message from God: "I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live again and return home to your own land." Ezekiel's good news is the promise that God's spirit will reach out and bring the people back from exile.

Under the hand of God, Ezekiel is carried to a valley littered with dry bones, picked clean of their flesh by carrion birds, and dried out and bleached by the unforgiving sun. Although it is not named, its identification as "the" valley suggests a particular place; other clues suggest a battlefield. As such, it evokes ancient Near Eastern curses threatening treaty violators not only with wholesale destruction, but also with leaving the slain unburied for carrion to devour. The bodies of the slain were not granted the dignity of a proper burial, suffering the dreadful curse mentioned in Deuteronomy. "Your corpses will be food for all the scavenging birds and wild animals, and no one will be there to chase them away."

Earlier, Ezekiel had prophesied that the idolatrous nation would be judged for its idolatry, their corpses laid beside their idols in the valleys, and their bones scattered around their altars. This judgment would be proof that YHWH was indeed God. Now, the dust having long since settled, Ezekiel stands in the valley, surveying the aftermath.

God begins by presenting a riddle to the prophet: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Surveying the valley filled with dried, brittle bones, the prophet meekly

responds with an exasperated, "O Lord God, only You know." So what has brought Ezekiel to the point of near speechlessness and despair? Up until this point, Ezekiel has been a passive observer and reporter upon the scene. Now, YHWH charges him to prophesy directly to the bones, a seemingly pointless endeavour if ever there were one.

As Ezekiel obeys the command to prophesy to the bones, the bones come together with a great rattling and quaking as sinew, flesh, and skin come on to the bones, reassembling themselves at the word of YHWH.

Although now connected, the bones remain zombie-like: a great host of bodies with no breath – and therefore no life. So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy a second time, this time to the breath itself. With the bodies now restored, Ezekiel is instructed to summon the four winds of heaven, to breathe into them and restore their spirit. In quaking earth and rushing winds we see the whole of nature thrown into a sort of sympathetic tumult as this great miracle is being effected, the ground restoring the bones that it had claimed and the winds bringing back the breath. The processes of death run in reverse - as a great army of slain once again stand on their feet and breathe once more. The bodies of the slain are recreated just like the first creation in Genesis, their bodies being formed first, before the animating breath is breathed into them.

This second sermon does the trick: the breath comes and the bodies come to life and stand up as an exceedingly large and impressive force, translated from

the Hebrew as “very, very large”. Then comes a third sermon - God’s sermon to Ezekiel and to the exiles through the prophet. God is now ready to clarify the significance in this elaborate visual metaphor: “these bones,” God says, “are the entire house of Israel.” Ezekiel’s audience although completely devastated, is a live one. Their deaths, their graves, their dashed hopes and feeling of being finished are the complicated result of human disobedience mixed with divine judgment.

God claims these exiles in this third, climactic sermon, calling them “my people” twice. God is fond of repetition in this last sermon: God promises to open their graves twice and promises to raise them from those same graves twice more. And, should this emphasis-via-repetition not suffice, be unclear, or otherwise appear somehow incomplete, like the lifeless valley of reconstituted zombies in the vision, the final verse clarifies the breath that has been mentioned so often in this passage.

It is God’s breath, since God promises to put God’s own breath (spirit) on the exiles with the same effect as on the bodies in the valley: “and you will live.” The goal of all this activity is, once again, that Israel “will know that I am the LORD.” And in the end, a three-fold staccato like reiteration: “I’ve spoken, and I will do it. This is what the LORD says.”

These assurances and emphases found in the third, explanatory sermon, and interwoven in the vision of dry bones – are designed to address the very real and comprehensive devastation that the exiles felt, being so far from home and so far from God’s good will. But that distance is now overcome, definitively – downright

miraculously – by the God, who opens up graves of people long dead, whose very breath or spirit enlivens, and who has resurrection power, as we heard in John’s Gospel, “I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die.”

God accomplishes these things among the exiles through the breath of one of their fellow exiles, the prophet Ezekiel: breath from his lungs, forced out over the vocal cords, shaped into sounds by lips and tongue, expressed as words – God’s words that brought hope to those who felt like they were so far gone - that no one and nothing could reach them. God did what God promised.

God explains to Ezekiel that the dry bones represent the whole house of Israel. These are not the ones who were slain but those who have survived in exile. They feel cut off from God’s presence – perhaps because they perceive the covenant to have been severed, certainly because absence from the Jerusalem Temple closes off any possibility of seeking God. For the exiles, being cut off from God means they are as good as dead.

They believe that their hope has gone and have compared themselves to dried bones. However, as YHWH’s creative word is prophesied into the situation, he will restore them, even though Death itself would stand in his way. Just as his identity as God was proved by his bringing them to the grave of exile in judgment for their idolatry, so he would be proved to be God as he delivered them from that grave and restored them to the land. The promise that he would put his Spirit within them

might refer to the promise made in the previous chapter:

“Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean. Your filth will be washed away, and you will no longer worship idols. And I will give you a new heart, and I will put a new spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender, responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations.” – a promise that the nation would be animated with the strength that they need to serve YHWH aright.

This new heart is nothing the people can obtain for themselves. The new spirit is not their own, but God’s, a spirit enabling them to do what they could not before, to live as holy people before Holy God. The prophet spells out the divine intent and in the story of the dry bones he shows it.

If the dry bones represent the living exiles, then, it turns out that the entire vision is concerned, not with the reality of death, but with despair. The exiles were the survivors, yet they have dug their graves with their fear of God’s absence. To this hopelessness, Ezekiel offers a startlingly simple metaphor of divine presence, the ready availability of breath. In just fourteen verses, the word *ruach* occurs nine times. And while it is variously translated as “breath,” “wind,” and “God’s own spirit,” we would lose the metaphorical force of this usage if we tried to differentiate between the meanings. No matter how it appears, breath, wind, or spirit, it is all the same life giving force. And it is all from God.

And it is in this sense that breathing becomes a metaphor for divine presence.

Despite the exiles' fear of being cut off from God, God is as near to them as their own breath. Ezekiel's vision does nothing to alleviate them of their present difficult circumstances, though it does promise them a future in their own land.

Although still in exile, still continuing to cope with the death of loved ones, still mourning the loss of familiar ways to find and meet God, they are reassured of God's presence. The standing multitude of dry bones brought back to life now acquires a somewhat different connotation. Because God is present, they can breathe, and stand ready for the future, looking forward in hope. At first this reading may seem to be an odd choice for Advent with all the references to death, graves and dry brittle bones. But the main focus is in the third sermon where God gives the exiles hope, breath, and the promise of a new life and relationship with God.

YHWH doesn't restore the dead bones of Israel to life immediately, but through the inspired word of his prophet and by means of the work of earth and wind. The words of the prophet are powerful, and capable of bringing life to a dead nation.

Divine initiative and human action are interwoven throughout this passage. It is God who leads Ezekiel to the valley and directs his attention and speech. It is the prophet who sees, and describes, the utterly dry bones, and responds by doing as he is asked, ordering the desiccated bones to hear God's word. As he does so, with no help from the bones themselves (what could the dead do?), God brings them together.

God adds sinews, tendons to attach them; flesh, muscles to make them

strong, and skin to give them form. Yet still they lie lifeless. It is only when God tells the prophet to speak to the *ruach* – the spirit, or breath – that the spirit breath blows from the four winds and the bodies live and stand. Divine agency and human response appear interwoven, if not inextricable. Initiative comes from God, who makes sure the prophet participates. Ezekiel calls to the spirit; the spirit enters the people; they come to life, a vast multitude. Only grace fills the gap between what we are made for and what we ourselves can manage.

Looking out over the valleys of dry bones of our own day, we may feel inclined to join with Israel's lament. Ezekiel's prophecy of dramatic divine restoration — a restoration so improbable and remarkable that it can only be effected by an act of new creation — summons us to a new hope, to a great expansion of the horizons of possibility. It also calls us to a new confidence in the role that we can play in bringing life to dead situations. As we bear God's word, we may even prophesy new life into political and social causes that are lost beyond hope of redemption.

The work of politics is constantly framed by visions of the possible and the impossible. For instance, writer, political philosopher, cultural theorist, Slavoj Žižek has observed that, for most people, it is now easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. When such political possibilities have been surrendered, political action becomes a matter of accommodation to, palliation of, or minimal mitigations of a hopeless situation. This quenching of the imagination, the constriction of the horizons of the possible, and the consequent guttering of the hope of meaningful action towards change is what Ezekiel addressed in his day.

As we witness YHWH's use of the voice of his prophet to bring about a deliverance and restoration beyond hope, we can find the confidence to hold open the impossible possibilities, acting with confidence in God's power to work through us to transform our world. Like the prophet Ezekiel, we may be called and equipped to become the handmaidens of a remarkable "eucatastrophe".

Eucatastrophe is a term coined by English writer J. R. R. Tolkien which refers to the sudden turn of events at the end of a story which ensures that the protagonist does not meet some terrible, impending, and very plausible doom - it's a catastrophe or dramatic event leading to plot resolution that results in the protagonist's well-being. That is something we can hope for during our Advent season as we prepare for the coming of the Christ child - hope that life's protagonists - the refugees, the homeless, the sick, the hopeless, the helpless, threatened by catastrophes of famine, war, abuse, slavery, disease - will find resolutions. God's faithful people empowered by God's breath - God's *ruach* will help to avert the threatening doom facing God's children.

Amen.