

Dem Dry Bones
Lent 5 A (Ezekiel 37; Romans 8:6-11)
April 10, 2011

The prophet Ezekiel's wild vision of a valley of dry bones coming back to life is one of those biblical stories that needs to be seen as well as heard. This is one of those Sundays when I wish we had a big screen up front for you to see visual images of some of the graphic artwork inspired by this text over the centuries. We will have to settle for the mind's eye and the big screen inside your brain. Ready? Action!

Maybe the place to begin is with a song. (Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones, Now Hear the Word of the Lord)

Here on this Sunday near the end of Lent and right up against Palm Sunday and Holy Week, the Old Testament tips its hand and shows us that resurrection isn't just a New Testament thing. Six hundred years before Jesus, Ezekiel had a vision of a valley of dry bones, representing a long-since defeated army of Judah's finest soldiers, long-since dead, with the flesh rotted and eaten away by insects, worms, vultures, hyenas and other scavengers. The valley of dry bones is not just a boneyard of skeletons either, but scattered dry bones with feet and ankles and shins and knees and thighs and hips separated and strewn around like the unassembled pieces of a coroner's jigsaw puzzle. This is not just a morgue scene of death and destruction, where, with a little imagination, an observer might say to himself, "Perhaps one of these corpses is still alive. Let's check for a pulse. Perhaps somebody here can be revived with CPR." As we have heard too often in recent times (in Haiti and now Japan), the mission of mercy has long since shifted in this valley from rescue of those who may still be alive, to recovery of bodies we expect to be dead, to a field for CSI-type forensics experts to come in with DNA testing to try to figure out which bone belongs to which.

This is an extreme picture. Historically, it is about the demise of the kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south. The people of the promised land have been overtaken and defeated, the Jerusalem temple has been destroyed, and the brightest and best of the capital city's people have been sent into exile in far away Babylon. An

Assyrian king (Sennacherib, 704-681 BCE) boasted in his annals, "With the bodies of [the enemies'] warriors I filled the plain, like grass." The people of the promised land were removed from it and sent far away as exiles, prisoners and refugees of war and slaves. God calls the prophet Ezekiel, himself a priest and exiled member of the Jerusalem elite, to prophesy to the exiles and tell them that God can and will breathe new life into them. God can and will take all those dry bones, scattered on the floor of the valley of humiliating national defeat, destruction and death, and knit them back together again into viable human skeletons, and then put sinews, flesh and skin on those bones and breathe life into them once again.

The vision is not just about the individual resurrection of the dead, but the resurrection of the whole community of resident aliens, struggling to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. It is public as well as private resurrection, social as well as personal, communal and even national as well as individual.

The story gives me some hope that maybe even our own beloved nation and state might find a way through the dark political valley of budget division and opposing ideologies. It also sheds light on the divides of flesh and spirit that we allow to overtake even our faith. In Paul's letter to the Romans today we heard about flesh versus spirit, and right away we jump to the conclusion that he is talking about flesh and blood bodies on the one hand and spiritual souls on the other. One of the persistent heresies in biblical tradition comes from outside the Bible, from classical Greek culture. That heresy gets reinforced by movies and popular culture and even many of our churches. It is that life is hopelessly divided into spirit and flesh, soul and body, eternal and temporal, immortal and mortal. Paul tries to use that Greek language to say what the rest of the Bible says, that God has created all things, and no matter how we try to slice and dice it, it is all a gift of God.

The Gnostics were an early Christian sect that taught that material life, our bodies especially, were evil and that the spark of God in us, the soul, was the redeemable part. The Apostles Creed and other early Christian statements of faith tried to combat this idea by saying that we believe in the resurrection of the body, not the soul. Yet most of us grew up believing that when our bodies die, our souls slip out

and go to heaven. All four gospels were clear as a bell that Jesus rose bodily from the tomb, and yet we are somehow content to believe that our bodies don't matter all that much in the end, and there are libraries full of speculative books about the shape of our existence in the afterlife. How can we have life without our bodies? The early church said that we cannot.

Paul's point and Ezekiel's point do not differ. God creates life and God renews life, and life as we know it is a material, bodily function, organic, biological business. We are flesh that the Creator has inspired, grass that the Creator has animated, and dust that the Creator has moistened and shaped and breathed into life. Recall that the words we translate as spirit, breath and wind are but one word in the Bible, in the Old Testament's Hebrew and the New Testament's Greek. Paul speaks of the life of the Spirit as that which transforms the life of the flesh because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, crucified and buried, body and all. Ezekiel speaks of new life for God's people through the re-created bodies of those whose only legacy is a valley of dry bones. If God could create life from the dust of the earth, forming Adam and Eve from clay, why could God not re-create "dem dry bones" to live again? Why could not the dead be raised to new life?

We have to shake this idea that our bodies are bad and our souls alone are good. We have to shake this idea that they are separated, that we are divided in two irreconcilable parts, and that God's world is somehow so divided. God is one, and God's creation is one as well. Indivisible. As Mark Twain put it, the world is divided into two groups: those who believe the world is divided into two groups and those who do not. When Paul talks about the life of the Spirit, over against life lived according to the flesh, he is talking about a quality of life that is connected, bone upon bone, to the crucified and risen Christ, instead of living that life that only ends in sin and death. Through the Spirit, we already participate in the power of the resurrection. Our bodies, as Paul says, "dead because of sin" have become means of grace, connection and joy. The joy of the resurrection renews the whole earth, an earth which includes its dust and clay and sea and slime and all the life that was formed of it or crawled from it.

Lent is an interim time, a between the times time. We march with Jesus to the cross, knowing that it is Friday but that Sunday's a-comin'. Traditionally, we have denied our flesh in some way during Lent, to give up something that our bodies crave in order to focus on our spiritual lives. Such disciplines can have the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the false idea that we are divided, our bodies and souls, and that our souls cannot win without our bodies losing. Whatever we do or don't do during the remaining two weeks of Lent, I would offer this: We live, even now, in the light of the resurrection. The life lived according to the flesh is already dead. The life of the Spirit, the resurrection Spirit of the Risen Christ, is available even now, as we struggle with or enjoy this divinely created material life in the world, lived in our flesh and blood bodies.

The central affirmation of our faith is that just as we have been buried with Christ in baptism, so we will be raised with Christ in resurrection. Not just in soul, but in heart, mind, strength, bones, brain, body --"all of me." Can these dry bones live? You betcha.

It is true that the old that has passed away still seeks refuge in some dark corner of our being. (Amy Plantinga Pauw) With T.S. Eliot, we might ask prayers for ourselves and others, for

*Those who walk in darkness, who chose thee and
oppose thee,
Those who are torn on the horn between season and
season, time and time, between
Hour and hour, word and word, power and power...*
(T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*)

We make our way through Lent to Easter as those who know, in every bone and sinew, that they are bound for glory, and not because of our moral superiority or denial of our flesh, but because the Spirit has bound us up and knit us together with the glorified Christ who is, as Paul says, "the firstborn within a large family." (Romans 8:29)

Can these dry bones live? Everybody together now: You betcha!