

NEW LIFE, OLD SCARS

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

The prophet Ezekiel lived during the time of the Babylonian Exile. In 597 BC, the armies of the Babylonian empire laid siege to Jerusalem and forced the city to bow and surrender. The King of Judea and many of the nation's leaders were carried back to Babylon as its captives.

Ten years later, the city rebelled against being ruled by the Babylonians and this time the Babylonians razed the city, tore down its walls, and destroyed the great temple. And there a second wave of deportations.

Among those in the first group of deportees was a young man named Ezekiel. While in Babylon, God would call Ezekiel to be one of God's prophets, preaching God's word to the people.

The period of the Babylonian captivity was one of great trauma for the Jews. For those left behind in Jerusalem, their capitol lay in ruins and their future as a nation was in doubt. For the exiles—while they may have been physically comfortable in Babylon—spiritually, they were dying. Their heads were full of questions. Had their God been defeated by some Babylonian deity? Had their God abandoned them, given up on them? Would they ever see their families or homeland again? The answer to the last question is no. Most of the captives would not see Jerusalem again. It would be 70 years—several generations—before Cyrus the Great would defeat the Babylonians and allow the Jews to return home.

The prophet Ezekiel addresses this situation over and over in the book we know as Ezekiel, but it is the passage which we read today that is probably the most well-known of his words. Our reading today is a vision of Ezekiel—a vision in which God lifts him up and transports him to a great valley that is littered with bones—dry, sun-bleached, human bones. God poses a question to Ezekiel about the bones. God asks, *Mortal, can these bones live?*

If I were to have with me a bone, let's say the femur from a deer—a bone I found while walking in the woods—and if I were to hold it up and ask you, "can this bone live?" you would all assure me that no, it would not. This bone was clearly dead. It had no marrow, no flesh. We could establish beyond a shadow of a doubt that this bone was deer-ly departed.

Speaking of bones: Some tourists are in the museum of natural history and they are marveling at the dinosaur bones. One of them asks the guard, "Can you tell me how old the dinosaur bones are?"

The guard replies, "They are 100 million, 4 years, and 6 months old."

“That is an awfully exact number,” says the tourist. “How do you know their age so precisely?”

“Well,” the guard says, “the dinosaur bones were 100 million years old when I started working here, and that was four and a half years ago.”

More:

What do the skeletons say before eating? Bone appetite.

Who was the most famous French skeleton? Napoleon Bone-apart.

Who was the most famous skeleton detective? Sherlock Bones.

Okay. Back to Ezekiel. Ezekiel is talking with God in this vision, and Ezekiel has faith, and when God asks, *Mortal, can these bones live?* it is a much different question than when I ask pose that question about some deer bone. Ezekiel answers, *O Lord God, you know.*

So God says to Ezekiel, *Prophecy to these bones. Say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Tell these dry bones, these human fragments scattered across this landscape, tell them that God will cause breath to enter into them and they shall live. God will lay sinews on them. God will cause flesh to come on them. God will cover them with skin, and put breath in you. And you shall live and you will know that God is the Lord.*

So Ezekiel does as he was told and he prophesies, and suddenly, across the floor of the valley, bones begin to shake, and bones begin to rattle, and bones begin to roll together, bone to bone. And Ezekiel sees that the bodies are complete with sinews, and flesh and skin. But they do not breathe.

And so God tells Ezekiel to continue to prophesy, to prophesy to the breath calling for the winds to breath upon these remains so they may live. Ezekiel does so, and he calls for the breath of God, the spirit of God which brought life to creation, and the multitude stands to their feet.

The vision shifts a bit here when God informs Ezekiel that these bones scattered across the landscape are the people of Israel—the people who have lamented, *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.* These are the exiles, dragged from their homes to a foreign land to serve a foreign king. They feel lost and abandoned and devoid of hope. They feel cut off from their land and cut off from their God. They are dry bones.

God instructs Ezekiel to continue to prophesy and inform the people that God offers them life. God will return them to Israel and they will know that God is with them. God’s spirit will be with them. They shall live. God will place them on their own soil, and they will know the Lord.

The truth is that most will not see their homes again. Most will die in Babylon. Their children may choose to return one day. But in time, the people will learn that when they are with God, Israel is with them.

This passage is one the most powerful in scripture. The vivid imagery of the valley littered with bones grabs the imagination of all who read it. It is clear something terrible has happened here. This is not some sort of elephants' graveyard where people come to die. Those who died here were slain as Ezekiel explains. They are the victims of some great battle. Their bodies were not buried but were left to rot in the sun, to be eaten by carrion and scavengers. This is Ezekiel's vision, this valley of dry bones.

I am sure that most of us who read this passage today are approaching it theologically. Here, in the fifth week of Lent with Easter just two weeks away, we have the resurrection of Jesus in our sights. Theologically, we know that God does not leave us, that God offers new life—a fact played out in Easter. We know all this and for that reason I am aware of the fact that I am preaching to the choir. You are people of faith. You know that God is with you. I have watched and have seen that even in the most trying times your faith does not disappear. You may doubt, you may even question, but you are people with a strongly rooted connection to God. You are not dry bones.

One thing we need to remember about the resurrection is that it is messy. New life does not mean that we become little babies. New life means we carry the scars of our old lives with us. Jesus, following the resurrection, had scars to show his disciples. Our scars remind us of where we have been, what we have experienced, what we have learned. New life is life in which God become focus of our lives, even our very breath. Each time we inhale, it is a sign of God's spirit being with us.

My charge to each of you is to be a prophet like Ezekiel, to carry the living word of God to those who do not hear it, to those who are dried up, cut off, adrift, forgotten. You have the power of God with you. Share it. You have the gift of new life, of resurrection. Share it. You have God's spirit to breathe on those whose lungs are empty. Share it. Let the people know that God is with them.