



"Can These Bones Live?"

a sermon by

Kathleen A. Crowe

First Presbyterian Church
Charlotte, North Carolina

May 10, 2006

Ezekiel 37:1-14.

In the weeks after the celebration of the resurrection of our Lord, the challenge for us quickly becomes one of discerning how to incorporate the new hope of the empty grave into our daily lives. What does it mean to share with the people around us this radical vision of life after death? The prophet Ezekiel knew something of this question when he was given several visions from God during the time of the chosen people's exile around 597 bc. Israel as a nation stood divided and conquered by foreign invaders with pagan gods because of her sinfulness. After the cry of Lamentations goes out the scriptures give voice to the prophet Ezekiel, who tells the people of his striking glimpse into God's vision. Our text comes from Ezekiel 37:1-14.

"The Lord set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones ... (and) he said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" At the time the prophet Ezekiel uttered these words, King Nebuchadrezzar II had deported the Jews to control and subdue their nation, it could be argued, much the same way that Hitler did before the holocaust. Rounding up the intellectuals, the artisans, the leaders and the elite he deported them from their hilly and temperate homeland of Jerusalem to the flat and hot low lands of Babylon. Those who survived the hard journey were farmed out into the military, or took up their trades with their families under the control of the king, while others were consigned to hard labor on one of the king's many building projects.¹ It was out of this place of exile that the psalmist mournfully sang, "By the rivers of Babylon- there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"² Israel was scattered to the wind, and her abilities to lay claim to the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey seemed as far away as the fond memory of her beloved Jerusalem. In this place the prophet Ezekiel found himself an exile among exiles charged with a word for a people who had lost all hope. "The Lord set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones...(and) he said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" What a question.

I would say that I cannot imagine what this scene looked like to Ezekiel. A vast desert wasteland filled with bones already dried from ages in the scorching wind and the heat. A true vision of isolation and death. Of irreversibility. Of a battle lost. Of a closed chapter. Bones scattered about like so many monuments testifying to the defeat of every expectation. This vision of Ezekiel must have felt so real to the people whose hearts and eyes were aching from dashed hopes and crushed visions for the reign of God's kingdom in the world. "Mortal, can these bones live?" God asks. And Ezekiel, looking out over that ancient battlefield says, "O Lord God, you know." I would say that I cannot imagine what this scene looked like to Ezekiel, but in a strange way I kind of can. And you can too, can't you? I have to admit that even as a minister there are times when I look out across the world and feel despair over the way things are and seem like they will always be. Feel grief over relationships where hope once flourished but caved as the heavy hands that divide us from one another and ourselves persisted in ruling with an iron fist.

I would venture to guess that we could all name a few chapters in our lives and community that we have quietly closed and tucked away. A few bones that we are resigned to

¹Darr, Kathryn Pfisterer. *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary vol. 6* ed., Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon) 2001. 1075.

²Psalm 137:1-2, 4.

seeing bake in the sun. Bones like, ‘the gap between the haves and the have nots continues to grow’ and ‘Well, that's just the way things are”. Familiar relics like, ‘to really get ahead in life you have to make some sacrifices’ or, ‘Some people you just can’t work with,’ or perhaps, ‘We don’t have a race issue, folks just prefer to stick with their own...right?’ And then there are those countless that are far more personal. “Mortal, can these bones live?” God asks. And somehow Ezekiel refrains from saying what I dare say I sometimes feel, ‘Come on, Lord. Can’t you see they are as good as dead? Just look around.” Joining the chorus of those who lament over those bones that look as though they will lay there forever.

Well known naturalist, Loren Isley, tells that one day in hunting season he was out on an expedition when he heard a gun shot in the woods, a brief cry...and then a sickening thud. Hunters, no doubt. As he made his way through the wilderness he identified there in a sunlit clearing, the yellow legs, chestnut brown and gray-blue body, and the rusty colored beret of feathers (on the) head of a sparrow hawk with a wingspan of over two feet. He hid in the bushes and studied the limp and motionless body...all folded over itself like a discarded paper fan. A yellow leg bending backward, it’s neck contorted like PCP pipe. Was it...dead? Surely it was dead. Or was it alive? He watched. Should he touch it? Yearning to give aid, willing to risk the ridges of the yellow ripping beak, he felt a tenderness to wrap the hawk in his khaki field jacket, and take it to emergency aid. Isley crawled on the October cool forest earth on his hands and bare knees, feeling the pine needles, the acorn tops, the scraps of curled birch bark and stones under his palms and cutting his kneecaps. Closer and closer he crawled, respectfully, reverently, when, just three yardsticks away, he was startled by a piercing cry. Up in the sky, circling overhead, was the thereto-unseen companion sparrow hawk gliding, issuing a brilliant call, a summons, a mandate. At the call the fallen sparrow hawk lifted its dazed and drowsy head. Its black-lidded eyes slowly opened, and blinked. A feeling of rejoicing, as though for a fallen comrade still alive, was born in Isley as he watched the quiet rebirth, the recovery continue. He smiled at the bird, as though a friend, a child, had accomplished something so very wonderful that it bestowed a gift on you. The bird stretched out its neck, unfolded its two wings and righted itself. It took just a few flaps when soon like an eagle it rose, and rose, and rose- joining the one in the air in a stiff winged glide. And soared away.³

The call came forth from the mouth of God. A summons. A mandate: Prophecy. “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord... I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” It wasn’t a suggestion for looking at the world differently, it was a call to stare down every known limit in the physical world, to tell those dry bones lying defeated and decaying how things were going to change and to be an instrument for that change by the power of God. Prophecy, he says, and tell the house of Israel that is beaten and bruised, that says all hope is lost, that they are as good as dead, that I am going to open your graves and you shall live. And after he announces the good news Ezekiel watched as bone rattled and became knit to bone, flesh was restored, and at his word, God’s Word through him, the same breath exhaled by the Spirit into the nostrils of that being formed from dust called Adam in

³This beautiful story has been passed down to me through a largely oral tradition. While it obviously began with Isley, it was shared in this form first in a sermon preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in NYC by Tom Toole over a decade ago called, “The Sparrowhawk.” No manuscripts are available, but a video of the sermon can be obtained through Fifth Avenue.

Genesis chapter 2 filled those flesh and bones until they stood before him suddenly brimming with life. ‘Can these bones live?’ God asks. And Ezekiel has the wherewithal to realize that his own impression of the situation might not be the final word. That there was a distinct possibility that though he was staring into a grave, God just might have something else in store. And so he responds, ‘Lord God, you know.’” And the Lord tells him to prophesy.

And so the call goes out to us, high and circling above. Crying out to we who find ourselves crawling on hands and knees in fear and trembling and awe toward hope, and to those of us standing in the wilderness with eyes aching from the sight of those dried up visions of the kingdom that we know someone has simply got to claim. To those who are accustomed to standing before the empty grave of Christ, the call goes out to us. The summons. The mandate. Prophecy. Prophecy to the helplessness, the grief, to the broken community whose fragments are spread across this weary land and are longing for the flesh of the body to surround them. For the spirit of God to breathe new life into their desperate realities. Prophecy to the power of the spirit who led the corpse dancing forth from the grave and that insists that though we only see in part, in God’s vision and under his care there are unimaginable reasons to keep on hoping, though the desert is dry and dark and the promised land far, far away.⁴ People of God, prophesy In the name of Jesus Christ prophesy. And let them know that these bones can live. Amen.

⁴Darr, Kathryn Pfisterer. *The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary vol. 6* ed., Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon) 2001. 1504.