

Mortal, Can These Bones Live?
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Today the Prophet Ezekiel presents an intense vision that has beguiled and inspired Judaism and Christianity ever since. Traditionally, Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones is read during Passover week for Jews and today (the Fifth Sunday of Lent or on Pentecost) for Christians. The importance of this vision is clear when we consider when it's heard by the faithful. The vision is of a battlefield where the slain never received a proper burial--just a sad, forgotten pile of dry bones in a valley. Ezekiel is there with God and God asks him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" "O Lord God, you know." [1]

God is about to do a new thing in this valley with these dry bones. God will lay sinews on them, bind them bone to bone. God will cause flesh to come upon them. Skin covers the flesh--this sequence is the opposite of how bodies decompose. God is knitting these bodies back together before Ezekiel's very eyes. Finally, God will infuse them with breath, just like God did when God created Adam out of the earth and breathed into his nostrils. We hear Ezekiel explain to these piles of bones what God will do, and then God does knit these bodies back together for a larger purpose.

These resurrected people exist to counter what the people at that time were saying to each other. They were in exile and cut off from the land of Israel, lamenting, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." [2] We can imagine God thinking, seriously? You think you're cut off and you have no hope and your very bones are dried up--well see what I can do to a sad, sorry pile of bones. Do not lose hope.

This week in Bible Study we discussed the power of God and healing. Our group asked about my time as a hospital chaplain and what healings, if any, did I see? I shared that I once had an amazing interfaith moment with a Jewish family whose loved one died in the ICU. It was not a miraculous encounter of healing, but perhaps it was a small miracle. I arrived in the waiting room and the patient's widow asked if the family could go onto the unit to say their last goodbyes. Since there were fifteen family members, it was going to be difficult to fit everyone into a small ICU room. After checking with the nurses, I walked the family back onto the unit to say goodbye. At the end, I asked if they would like me to pray and the widow tearfully said yes while gently reminding me that they were Jewish.

I got really nervous, realizing that I couldn't rely on my UCC Book of Worship to get me through this time. I wondered if I would be able to say an appropriate prayer for this Jewish family in mourning and guessed at the only prayer that could be okay. It's what I often say to bless all of you: "May God bless you and keep you. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May God look upon you with kindness and give you peace." The family began crying harder and my heart sank thinking that I just unintentionally harmed them and was totally getting fired and needed this unit of CPE to graduate seminary and get ordained!

But through her fresh tears, the widow explained that this Benediction, from the Book of Numbers, is often said at life passages in the Jewish tradition. It's called The Priestly Blessing and God instructs Moses to use this prayer to bless the children of Israel. One of the family members remarked that even though I said the blessing in English and not in Hebrew, it was perfect just the same.

God turns to Ezekiel in the vision and says, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And part of us wants to say to God, of course not, are you crazy? It's just a lifeless pile of bones in some valley in the middle of nowhere. But then God does something completely unexpected and

remarkable. God knits these bones back together and brings people back to God. How could I say the perfect prayer for that Jewish family in mourning? I can be good, but I'm not that good. God did something astonishing that day in the ICU and it surprised me just as much as it surprised that Jewish family. When scholar Katheryn Pfisterer Darr wrote about the Book of Ezekiel, she said, "If Yahweh can restore desiccated bones and buried bodies to life, then there are absolutely no limits to God's power." Further, if God can put the perfect words in the mouth of a young, nervous hospital chaplain to comfort a grieving family of another faith, there aren't clear limits to God's power. This isn't just Ezekiel's vision or my vision, this is God's vision.

We have to ask ourselves what does it mean to look at our world and ourselves through God's eyes. Darr writes, "Can these bones live? Of course not. But look at them through God's eyes, and watch bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Watch as ligaments bind them together, flesh blankets them, and skin seals them tightly. Watch as God's spirit, which heals hopelessness, infuses them, so that they rise up--a great army testifying to the power of Yahweh." [3]

We mortals, we human beings often limit the power of God. Many scholars affirm that God's power is self-limiting; you know that whole free will thing. Perhaps once God gave the gift of free will to humanity; God couldn't take back that gift. God may, in Annie Dillard's words be somehow "out of the physical loop. Or the loop is a spinning hole in his side . . . To create God did not extend himself but withdrew himself; he humbled and obliterated himself, and left outside himself the domain of necessity." Dillard affirms that God may be a semi-potent deity, and yet God is so much greater than we can even imagine if the universe is like a spinning hole in God's very side. Once God endowed humanity with the gift of free will, God enabled us to use our gift for good or ill. Though God desires for us to come back to God, and grants grace upon grace in our lives.

Sometimes it's as if we don't want to give God any power at all. Because it makes us uncomfortable to consider God's power or the ways God moves in our lives today. Or it depresses or angers us to consider the times God didn't intervene to help us. Or maybe God did help us through someone else, maybe that's how God works, and we were too blind or stubborn or angry or lost to recognize that it was God's hand at work.

In the end, let's raise our eyes and change our view. Let's watch the impossible become possible. Let's look at the world through God's eyes, using God's vision for creation. This is what Ezekiel experienced in this vision and he passed it along for future generations of Jews and Christians. Yes, it's weird and kinda creepy and yet God makes the impossible possible. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel once said that Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones bears no date because every single generation needs to hear this story in its own time--these bones can live again! [5]

For Christians, next week is Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week. On Sunday Jesus will enter Jerusalem with shouts of hosanna, on Thursday we will witness the Last Supper and his betrayal and desertion, and on Friday we will stand together at the foot of his cross. For the followers of Jesus, for everyone who had pinned their hopes on him, the crucifixion was not just the death of their teacher and friend. His death was the death of their dreams--that God really was doing something new, that this Jesus of Nazareth was going to change the world with his vision, his teachings, his life. But God was not done with the story. The very symbol of Jesus' sad end would become a symbol of hope eternal, of God's power that defies our human understandings. [6]

At those times in our lives, when it feels like we are in a barren valley and there are lifeless piles of dry bones everywhere we look, let's look again. Let's look again with God's vision, for God making the impossible possible. "Mortal, can these bones live?" Amen.

[1] Ezekiel 37:3, NRSV.

[2] Ezekiel 37:11, NRSV.

[3] Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume VI*, 1503-1504.

[4] Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 168.

[5] Elie Wiesel, as quoted by Katheryn Pfisterer Darr in, "The Book of Ezekiel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume VI*, 1504.

[6] Pfisterer Darr, "The Book of Ezekiel," in *The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume VI*, 1504.