

“The Road to Easter”

Lent 5A

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; John 11:1-15

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From the Pulpit

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Prayer for Illumination: Send the breath of your Spirit on these words, O God. Like the wind that breathes into the Scriptures and into our weary souls, fill us with new life as we hear the word you have for us this day. Amen.

These texts today are not for the faint of heart. Too much imagery to warp our heads around. Surely, too much death and stench and dry bones to find any Good News.

As we continue on our journey through the sermon series of young preachers, I need to reframe--just a little bit. Today and only today---we celebrate the “Young-ISH” preacher among us. Call me ISH.

If you haven't read the book of Ezekiel, you may consider it for a summer reading list but hold on to the safety bar, because it's a wild ride.

Some of the great rabbis throughout history have taught that the book of Ezekiel, with its dreams, strange visions and explicit language, should not be read by any Torah student under the age of thirty.¹

The symbolism of “30” was likely linked to Ezekiel's own reported age when he began receiving his prophetic visions; perhaps the rabbis felt that if Ezekiel was old enough to see these weird word pictures, 30-something men were considered

¹ Jana Reiss, <https://sojo.net/articles/don-t-read-part-bible-if-you-re-under-30-or-woman> (Feb.10, 2010).

mature enough to read about them. The traditional explanation restricted women from reading Ezekiel because of its terrifying imagery and language and that women were perhaps too fragile or delicate to read this.²

Centuries later, enter seminary graduate and blogger Jana Reiss. She wrote a book summarizing the chapters of the Bible in 140 character or less. You guessed it---the Bible on Twitter, *The Twible. (Rhymes with Bible)*. It's the Bible, now with 68% more laughs, and 99% fewer begats.³

Reiss says, "Anyone under 30 isn't supposed to read the book of Ezekiel. There is some CRAZY [stuff] in here. (But p.s., you can use a fake ID.)"⁴ (unquote)

Here's the tweet for our text: "*Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones. Now hear the word of the Lord: Toe bone connected to the foot bone... The Foot....*" (Get the idea!)

In all seriousness, Ezekiel is one of the strangest books of the Bible. Bursting with bizarre symbolism and explicit language, the book seethes with divine fury even while simultaneously offering some of the most powerful expressions within the Old

² Ibid.

³ Jana Reiss, *The Twible*. Paraclete Press, 2013. www.janareiss.com

⁴ Ch: 37- Reiss continues, "When God's spirit departs from the Jerusalem temple in the book of Ezekiel, it's like in Star Trek where the Enterprise's shields go down and they're vulnerable to a Klingon attack. You really don't want to be on the ship at that moment."

Testament of God's desire to restore humanity and creation to wholeness.'⁵

Ezekiel, a priest in ancient Jerusalem, was exiled to Babylon. When word came back to Ezekiel that the Babylonians had leveled the city, committing what we would call genocide, Ezekiel had another strange dream. God called Ezekiel out and set him down in the middle of this valley full of bones.

It's a grim scene. It's a vision, not unlike the vision of a Civil War battlefield or the villages of Rwanda or the mass graves unearthed in recent years in Syria.

Perhaps Ezekiel was the only one left who could see that vision of all those bones. He was the only one sent by God who had any life left in him. As a prophet, Ezekiel was called to speak the cold hard truth of the devastation of his people and to call forth goodness.

As Jerusalem lay in ashes, Ezekiel's vision had God asking the question to him, "Can these bones live?" (vs. 3). Israel in exile. The bones of God's people. The walls of Jerusalem, figuratively, all around him in ruin. A people too far from the home they knew. Dreams dashed as bone dust blows in the wind. And yet---God speaks to Ezekiel and God acts. Ezekiel reminds God that it is only God who knows whether they can

⁵ Rev. Dr. Jacqueline Lapsley, Princeton Theological Seminary. Ezekiel: The New Interpreter's Bible, p.456.

live or not. With the power of the prophet's tongue, with the breath of God in him, Ezekiel looks at the grim reality before him and wonders "What could ever bring us life again after this?" What could return hope in the midst of such desolation?

James was failing two classes that semester and failing out of school. In over his head. He was depressed and ashamed. Too proud to get help. Too afraid to call home. He wondered what if anything would pull him out of such a dark place. He kept going. Pretending. Deeper and deeper into that valley with all shade. No ray of hope on the horizon when day came. His question: Can these bones live?

Every one of us, if we're honest with ourselves, has visited that personal valley.

The day you got that phone call.

The day you heard the word-cancer

The day you heard - "you're fired."

The day life was snatched too soon.

The day the newspaper headlines finally get to you.

So much pain, so much raw injustice, so much to distract us from the reality of what is going on in our world, our community, our family, ourselves.

We aren't reading this text in this season of Lent because it's an interesting snippet in Jewish history and the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 587 BC. Two and a half millennia later, we get this text because, like all mortals, we face our own figurative valley of the dry bones.

Sometimes there are parts of ourselves that are as broken and dry as in Ezekiel's vision. We admit we have those days. Those days when we are left to figure out what part in us is dying...what part is already dead.

We have our days. Days we when put on our best suit and tie. Days when we dress to impress, but we just can't dress up enough to cover the pain on the inside, to cover the flaws of our imperfection. We have days when even the forced smile can't cover the anger or disappointment or resignation we feel.

Admitting we have those days is hard enough, but through this we also stand in need of wisdom that is outside of ourselves. Insight greater than our wisdom, a love deeper than our love, a spirit beyond our spirit.

Maybe we fool ourselves and wonder, "If I just pull up myself by bootstraps" or "If I just work harder or with a better attitude" than these bones can live.

Sometimes these bones ache for something more. The truth is that no matter how hard we try, we can never love quite well

enough, never work quite hard enough, never be quite clever enough because we are bound by the fact that we are human.

Dry bones have no power to revive themselves. These bones find new life not because they are resourceful or have a good attitude. They rise not because they will themselves to live. They are revived because of God's own breath. God has the power to breathe life into the dry and deserted places of exile and loneliness. God breathes life into depression and anxiety. Into our sorrow. Into our darkness. God rattles the bones of those who are lost and searching. God reconstructs connective tissue, realigns ligament, rearranges tendon, repairs flesh, and revives air in the lungs of the air deprived.

Can these bones live? Yes.

God's promise of new life comes to us all: in the face of disappointment and discouragement, in the face of desolation and despair, God's power to restore humanity and creation to wholeness never ends.

James got help that semester. His roommate walked with him to the health center and when he checked. Stayed with him through the night because he was worried about him. His friend didn't give up on the potential he saw. He knew that there was life left in him, a good and productive and faithful life.

Can these bones live? Yes. They can live. By the breath of God, these bones can live. The darkness turns to dawn. The dryness is quenched. The doubt is soothed away by the power and the people of God.

And there is no better place than this—than this community of faith when we are worshiping and welcoming, connecting and communicating, engaging and building, to await God’s spirit of renewal in us. In this season of Lent, we reflect on our lives and in the hurting and broken places yearning to be made whole. In this season, we are given God’s breath daily, and we are invited to breathe. God is working in us to remind us that these bones live.

In a few minutes, come to the table and see what breath God has for us and for these bones. Body and Blood, Bread and Wine. Life made new once again.

Amen.⁶

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⁶ The Twible for the Gospel Lesson John 11: “The only NT example of JC crying is when his pal Lazarus dies. He also cries when the Reds lose, but it’s not recorded in the Bible.”