

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday in Lent- March 9, 2008

Scripture lessons: Psalm 130 & Ezekiel 37:1-14

DRY BONES

I don't think there's any way around it. Even for an Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel is one strange dude. Dreams, visions, ecstasies, altered states- name any frame of mind out of the ordinary and chances are high he's in it. But like many unusual characters down through the ages, Ezekiel's on to a lot of truth the rest of us often miss, ignore, or deny.

He lives in the worst of times for a Jew. He's in Jerusalem when the Babylonians first attack in 597 B.C. They carry him and half the population off into exile, but in Babylon Ezekiel continues to rave on. He prophesies hard words directed not so much against Babylon, but against his own people. He calls Israel fickle and faithless, and he's right about that.

But then worse news arrives. The Babylonians actually have gone back to Jerusalem to destroy the city. They level it and turn it into a death pit. When Ezekiel learns of this, he has the vision reported in today's second Scripture. Swept up in one of his mind-blowing trances, he sees a valley of dry bones. It's a scene of awful devastation- from our time imagine it like the mass graves of Iraq or the killing fields of Cambodia.

It's all meant to reveal God's word to Israel, the word God wants Ezekiel to deliver. The dry bones are a harsh symbol of Jerusalem laid waste- Jerusalem the golden become Jerusalem the ashen. Ezekiel looks out on a vast, grim wasteland and can't help but wonder, "Will there ever be life here again?"

The Lord asks *him*, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel answers, "Lord, you know." That is, "Lord, they can if you will it, but I don't know if you will."

The Lord replies, "Ezekiel, prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ' . . . hear the word of the Lord . . . Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.' Tell Israel they *will* know new life in their land."

But, of course, we're not reading from Ezekiel 37 today just because it speaks of a dramatic turning point in Israel's distant past. We're reading from it now because the dry bones Ezekiel saw are emblematic of our own worst times. The ancient devastation they stand for points to those days when we're laid low.

Think of those times when we're completely dispirited, sapped of all energy and strength, ready perhaps even to give up because it seems like there's just too much to overcome. Life's knot seems too tangled ever to untie; too much that goes on seems so shallow and hollow; all around there's too much pain, injustice, and sham.

The day comes when we receive a frightening diagnosis, or lose our job, or are betrayed big-time by someone we've long trusted and counted on. We have a cherished, lifelong dream blown away, or suffer the death of a close loved one much too soon, or fall into tears because the horror and ugliness of the daily headlines finally get to us. We wake up one day and feel for reasons we can't even name that it's all just useless.

We all know the valley of dry bones and Ezekiel's bizarre vision helps us to stay honest about that. God calls to us from it to let go of every scrap of false sunniness. Ezekiel's bleak imagery urges us to face head-on the dry bone valleys in all of our lives- in mine, in yours, and in everyone's.

Yet I'm afraid we often spend too much time and energy pretending that it's not so. How often do we put on a mask for the public to suggest that such times really don't afflict us? Others might feel run through the ringer by hard times, but not *me*.

So I make sure I'm put together on the outside- looking good, looking sharp, and looking smart. I can dress up on the inside, too, and push it to the surface as far as I can. I can put on an emotional wardrobe of the pasted smile, the unruffled but slightly stiff demeanor, the cool but strategic reticence all of which tries to say, "Hey, nothing ever really gets to me. Other people might get shaky, but not *moi*."

This can spill over even into our relationship with God. We start feeling we have to dress up for our Maker, as if this is something God wants us to do. We put on a well-worn but spiffed up costume of unflinching strength and competence. We think somehow this does God a favor.

Christian writer Kathleen Norris speaks to this in her book, *The Cloister Walk*. She tells of how her parents regularly took her to church when she was young but of how she soon abandoned the faith she thought she'd been taught once she was out on her own. She later found a new form of it that brought her back to church in her thirties. Since then she's spent a lot of time reflecting on her ins and outs with God.

From her childhood, she remembers church mainly as "a formal affair, a matter of wearing 'Sunday best' and sitting up straight." There was nothing necessarily wrong with that, she's sure, but in looking back she sees a connection between it and a belief she also absorbed at church which she now thinks is the biggest thing that went wrong in her Christian upbringing. It was the belief that you "had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God" . . . that (you had to be) a firm and even cheerful believer before (you) dare show (your) face in His church."

Kathleen Norris now calls this belief "insidious", and she's right about that. It's insidious because it leads us to think we're pleasing God when in fact we're only keeping our distance from the One who wants us to draw close.

But dress up is still what we often do, especially in a culture like ours that values appearances so highly. We dress up inside and out for God, for each other, and for ourselves. What we really need to do, according to Ezekiel and the season of Lent, is to bare our souls- bare them to ourselves with God and often with each other, too.

Ezekiel's vision can help us do that- at least to be honest about our dry bone days. It also keeps pressing on us the question that God asks, "Can these dry bones live again, and, if so, how?" Reflecting on our dry bone valleys, what kind of answer rings true?

Is it the answer of despair? Despair says, "Dry bones are dead bones and dead is the one thing we can't do anything about. Dry bones cannot and will not live again." That's not God's answer to Ezekiel and as Christians it can't be ours, either, BUT . . . Lord knows we can be tempted to it.

Here's another answer perhaps more commonly heard. It says, "Sure, life can come again to our dry bone valleys, IF . . . we work at it. We have to have a positive attitude. We have to stay open to the possibilities of new life because otherwise staying dead is a self-fulfilling prophecy. With positive attitude we can gain fresh energy to put what's left of our dry bones to work. We can imagine new possibilities, develop a plan, work it and see it through. With genuine determination and effort new doors can open. We can ask for help from others, too, because only a fool thinks a Lone Ranger can find the way to new life amid a valley of dry bones."

There's a great deal of truth in that answer, I think, and it's one we need to take fully to heart. But before we can, we have to have another one. We have to receive the benefit of a third answer that's even more basic and truthful and without which our dry bones *can't* have a positive attitude, exercise any imagination, do any work, or enlist any help.

This third one is necessary because it faces up to the hard truth that despair insists on. Despair says, "Dry bones are dead bones and dead is the one thing we can't do anything about." Despair *is* right about that and there's no denying it, but despair is wrong to say that this means dead bones can't live again. *We* can't do anything about dead bones, but *God* can.

Ezekiel sees dead bones come back to life NOT because of anything from within the bones themselves- on their own, they're dead and completely incapable. But they come to life again through the power of God. The Spirit *breathes* upon them. Dry bones live again not through more of the spirit of you and me, but only through the free and pure gift of the true and living God.

We enter a dry bone valley and feel, "I don't think I have it in me to get through this." We feel completely tapped out, but still try to give ourselves a pep talk. "Come on, you can do it. A shot of positive attitude, a little imagination, nose to the grindstone, some help from your friends- you can do it."

But deeper down we know we can't. We're forced to face the God's honest truth that sometimes there are gut-wrenching and heart-busting circumstances in which our own resources simply run out, in which have *nothing* left of ourselves with which to cope. Wrung out, we have to wait upon our Maker and Redeemer. We have to turn outward and upward because we have nothing left inside of us to which we can turn.

In the midst of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln faced up to this truth over and over. Widely acclaimed as one of the greatest, if not the greatest President we've ever had and perhaps one of the greatest leaders in all of history, Lincoln was a man of enormous personal strength, ability, and integrity. But mired in the horrors of our nation's war against itself he said: "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My wisdom and all that about me were insufficient for the day."

At the end of ourselves, we wait on God for what only God can do. Israel says to Ezekiel, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off." But God tells them, "Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord . . ."

Today we all have dry and dead bones in us. We all have parts of us that have been sucked to the marrow whether through killer tragedy over which we've had no control or through lifeless routine in which we've let ourselves get stuck. But in this Lenten season, we especially remember that for a long time the true and living God has shown keen interest in working closely with dry bones and rotting graves.

God gave ninety-year old Sarah a child that blessed the whole world. God brought homeless and hopeless Israel back home again. And God will sit with us once more a couple of weeks from now on Holy Saturday right next to Jesus' tomb. The Spirit will whisper in our ear again, "Wait and see."

It's God's whisper every day to every dry and dead bone in us, "Wait and see. New life will come." This is the word of the Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER- March 9, 2008

Wondrous God, we ask You to breathe on us again, to bring life back once more into every dry and dead place in us. We know that Your Holy Spirit is on the move throughout Your creation, doing new things to move us all closer to the day of Your new heaven and earth. So help us to breathe deeply with Your Spirit's breath.

Your life pulses with the gift of Your love, and so alive in You we pray in love for Your whole world. We pray for peace between nations and within nations. We pray for people and governments everywhere to find the courage and wisdom to work together for the good of all rather than the narrow advantage of a few.

We pray for all those who are suffering, for those who have lost faith in the love of others or of You. We pray for children who are neglected or abused. We pray for any of Yours anywhere

who are hungry, thirsty, or homeless, for those who are ill, wounded, or disabled, for the grieving and those who watch over a loved one dying, for the victims of war, crime, or persecution.

We pray for those closest to us with whom we share our daily lives and work, for those whose faith in Your goodness is being tested by anxiety or sorrow, for those who feel they have little to live for because they're depressed or oppressed, for those for whom faith in You is a problem and not a joy, for those who are wrestling with honest doubt, for those who are outraged by the world's suffering, for those who are unable to believe that they're forgiven.

There are so many ways our souls can dry out and die, O Lord, but Your Spirit is alive and well and on the move in this, Your world. So breathe on us, breath of God, and fill us with Your life anew. We pray this in Jesus' name and as he's taught us, saying together, "Our Father, . . ." Amen.