

Ezekiel 37:1-9
“More Than Bones”

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Ezekiel is in a valley of bones this morning. The storywriter says he’s in a valley of dry bones, *very* dry bones. That’s an interesting editorial addition, don’t you think? Is there any other kind of bone you would expect to find in a valley besides a dry bone? Biologically speaking, aren’t all bones generally dry? Who’s ever heard of a soft, moist bone? To say Ezekiel is in a valley of dry bones is like saying he’s in an ocean of water. It seems obvious.

But that’s not what the storywriter says exactly. The way Dan and Ryan read it for us just now, Ezekiel is in a valley of *very* dry bones. Which is to say, these bones have been out in this valley, under the hot sun, for a very long time. Whoever these bones once belonged to, they died long ago. And if these bones were at one time separated out like individual caskets buried in the earth and marked above by gravestones; if there were ever any friends or family members who would come by to take care of the grave, maybe to dig out the weeds and plant some fresh flowers, they stopped coming around a long time ago. For these bones are now all exposed, just out there in plain view for anyone to see. Hundreds of them, thousands, maybe even millions of them. “The valley was full of bones,” reports Ezekiel.

Can you imagine what a sight that must have been? I don’t think anyone but Ezekiel knows for sure what the valley of dry bones looked like. There have been all kinds of artistic renderings over the years, from the subtle to not-so-subtle.

I also don’t know that we can say for sure where this valley was. Ezekiel was a prophet to the nation of Israel during their time of exile in Babylon. In the opening verse of the book of Ezekiel, he is said to be by the River Chebar, which is believed to have been in Northern Mesopotamia, near present day Iraq.

That creates a rather startling image for some readers. In recent time Iraq has been labeled enemy territory. The U.S. State Department has had Iraq on a no-fly zone list for longer than I’ve been alive. As a country, we’ve been at war with Iraq for decades now. Maybe we shouldn’t be surprised to hear, therefore, that once upon a time there was a valley of dry bones there. For isn’t that the kind of ending we would expect to find for our enemies?

The closest thing our own history can come to it perhaps is in what the Nazis did to the Jews at Auschwitz, Warsaw, and Belarus in World War II, and the genocide brought upon the Tutsis by the Hutus in Rwanda in 1994. Just a mass grave of bones belonging to people that no one remembers anymore. No one that is except God. Verse 1: “The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley full of bones.”

Did I mention that this is a story full of interesting editorial additions? It would seem that in remembering the bones in that valley, God also wants Ezekiel to remember, and to see that the bones are not the bones of the enemy, but of family. In this case, of Ezekiel’s

family—his own people, his kinfolk. How, though, have they come to be dried up in the valley?

The story of the people Israel is that God called them the apple of God's eye, the beat of God's heart, the cream of God's crop, the first among many. After failing too many times to see, however, that being chosen first by God meant only that you were to be first in love and service to others; after exploiting the poor to their own social and economic advantage; after turning their plowshares back into swords; after trusting in the power of their own might over God's mercy, and running out after every false god that called their name, in the end their story amounted to nothing more than a heap of very dry bones in a hot valley.

Can you imagine what a sight that must have been?

I was never very good at science in high school. I never even took Anatomy. So to me, a bone is just a bone. Sure, an orthopedist could probably look at a bone and tell you whether it's a femur or a tibia. A medical examiner could look at the jaw and teeth of a corpse and tell you whether it comes from a man or woman, an adult or child, and maybe even tell you how old they were. But I couldn't. If I were standing in a valley full of bones, I couldn't tell you who any of the bones belonged to. I couldn't give you the ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or skin color of their previous owner. I couldn't tell you which was family and who was foe. Like Ezekiel, to me, a bone is just a bone, and this means I also would never be able to figure out how to put them back together.

"Mortal," God asks Ezekiel, "can these bones live?" And Ezekiel responds, "O Lord God, you know."

It reminds me of the scene in John's gospel where two sisters, Mary and Martha, come rushing to Jesus. "Come quickly," they plead, "our brother Lazarus is sick and needs your help." Mary and Martha are at wits end to know what to do. They've run out of options, Lazarus is going to die unless Jesus can come quickly and save him. And Jesus knows this, but still he takes his sweet time in getting to Lazarus, so that by the time he does arrive on the scene, Lazarus has been dead and gone for 4 days.

In those days, 1 or 2 days in the grave and you might still be able to revive the body. Even 3 days might still give you a chance. But to say someone has been dead for 4 days is like saying, his bones are very dry. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died," Mary says to Jesus. "But even now I know that God knows."

"Your brother will rise again," he tells her.

"I know. On the last day, but not today."

"No," Jesus assures her. "Today. For I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." At this, Jesus stands in front of the grave and calls the dead man to come out.

Of course, it's not as easy to do as it sounds. Call me crazy, but when I was at the cemetery today filming the Children's Story, I tried. I called, "Come out," but no one did. Nothing happened.

Good thing for me, though, the point of the story is not to make me think that if I could raise the dead, then maybe I could also keep bad things from ever happening. Bad, difficult, hard, death-dealing things happen. As one of my favorite authors put it: "Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen. Don't be afraid." For Jesus does not stand in front of the tomb to keep Lazarus out, nor does Ezekiel stand in the valley to keep the bones from drying up. Rather, they stand in the midst of pandemic with their eyes wide open to all that has happened—with Lazarus long in the tomb and the bones very dry—and they fix their eyes on the God who knows.

The God who knows how to mend our broken bones and our broken spirits, because it was God who made us in the first place. The God who knows we might look the part of foe, but we are family. The God who knows we too have done our terrible part to dig the graves of the poor, and we need help getting back to our plowshares again. The God who knows our fears, but who also believes we have within us the power to overcome them with love.

The poet Mary Oliver once wrote,

"The witchery of living
is my whole conversation
with you, my darlings.
All I can tell you is what I know.

It's more than bones.
It's more than the delicate wrist with its personal pulse.
It's more than the beating of the single heart.
It's praising.
It's giving until the giving feels like receiving.
You have a life—imagine that!
You have this day, and maybe another, and maybe still another.¹

"Lazarus, come out!" "Dry bones, live again." And they do. By the grace and mercy of God, they do. And you will, too.

Amen.

¹ From Part 3 of her poem, *"To Begin With, Sweet Grass"*