

Can These Bones Live?

Today our scripture takes us with Ezekiel to the Valley of Bones. It's a place full of dead and decomposed bodies, where they are then reanimated into living people again. I always thought that today's lectionary passage should fall at the same time as Halloween – doesn't it have a Zombie movie sort of tone to it?

At the beginning of the story, before we get to the bones walking around again, God brings the prophet to this valley of death. And then God asks a weird rhetorical question or maybe it's a trick question. It's hard to tell. "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel answered, God, only you know.

You know immediately that something wild, weird and possibly dangerous is about to happen whenever God addresses you by the ONE title that all humans throughout all of history and times share in common. "Mortal." This title and address means, "a being that will die and cease to exist, or one with a finite lifespan."

We know that God is up to something when we are addressed by the fact that we are temporary – O Mortal, can these bones live? That is the question God asks Ezekiel.

Even stranger is Ezekiel's headstrong, somewhat flippant and almost exasperated response: Only you know that, God! He almost sounds like a teenager, right? Like, why are you making me look at the reality of the situation Duh! why have you brought me all the way to face this place of tragedy and loss only to ask me about the impossible and the hopelessness found here. We both know the answer to the answer to this silly question, God, only you know!

Ezekiel doesn't need a reminder that things are tough for his people and his calling as a priest.

So who was this prophet Ezekiel with such a direct and confrontational form of communication with God?

Old Testament scholar Michael Coogan is a big fan of Ezekiel and this passage in particular. According to Coogan, Ezekiel is a special prophet for a couple of important reasons. The first is that he was the first prophet in the Bible to be called to the work of being a prophet outside of the Holy Land. He is a prophet in exile who started his ministry while far away from home. He only received his call once already far away from Jerusalem in an unfamiliar context.

While his contemporary, Jeremiah saw the destruction of the temple in person before being exiled to Babylon, Ezekiel was taken to Babylonia in 597 and only learned of the destruction of the temple secondhand, through what others told him while already in exile as a priest far from his sacred spaces to which he was called as a priest. So Ezekiel has to rely on imagination and stories to survive in ministry.

Secondly, Ezekiel speaks in the first person and offers one of the most orderly and linear accounts of any prophet in the Bible. This makes Ezekiel the favorite prophet of all Methodists because there is a method to his life. This is important because the story we are hearing, near the end of the Ezekiel narrative is the culmination of a life of prophecy and it ends, in hope rather than despair. Nothing is accidental or chaotic with Ezekiel – our Methodist like prophet.

Lastly, Ezekiel is a prophet who has nothing left to lose. He has lost his home, his calling as a temple priest and never even got to say goodbye. Coogan says something that sheds light on this prophet's text

and the Valley of Fry Bones when he writes that “This passage is symbolic and does not mean actual resurrection of the dead, a concept that will not develop for several centuries.

So when conservative Christians misread this text as having something to do with Jesus and the resurrection, it is a blatant misreading of the story. Ezekiel is a surrealist operating from a place of profound metaphor for a renewal of hope in a time of exile from power and complete and total despair. This vision is a symbol of hope for Israel in a time when all seems lost and despair prevails.

Verse 11 and following says: Mere mortal, these bones are the whole House of Israel. The people keep saying, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is gone, and we are doomed.’ Prophecy, therefore, and say to them, “Thus says Sovereign God I am going to open your graves and raise you up from the dead, my people. I will return you to the land of Israel. When I open your graves and raise you up, you, my people will know that I am God. Then I will put my Spirit into you and you will return to life, and I will settle you back on your own land. Then you will know that I, YHWH, have spoken and made all this happen, says Sovereign God.

I don’t think it’s an exaggeration that we are living in a time where the bodies are piling up in the valley.

The work of environmental stewardship and climate change awareness for God’s environmental justice is before us in the Valley of bones. We feel the decay and what feels like death as progress is reversed and the planet and the leadership itself seems to be running towards peril and ecological and climate collapse. The body of environmental stewardship is at our feet.

The body of our work in socially sustainable and just communities, affordable housing, homelessness advocacy, and fair housing policy is piling up body upon body upon body, upon body with ever new news cycle in the valley of bones.

The body of healthcare for all, equality and access in medicine, access to insurance, falls slowly at our feet in the valley of bones. The bones and vestiges of the body of civil discourse and the marketplace of ideas and democracy itself seems to teeter on the edge of a cliff overlooking this valley of bones. Are they about to be the pickings for vultures of commerce and greed.

We see the bones of our work to end racism and to start sacred conversations about race...bones of education as school funding is stripped and curriculum are replaced with convenient alternative facts...bones, bones, bones, bones...bones of LGBTQIA and especially Transgender quality and access to safe spaces and restrooms that match gender identity...bones of elder services...bones of Christian love...bones of mental healthcare.

God set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me around them; there were very many lying in the valley and they were very dry. God said, “Mortal, can these bones live? I answered, God you know the answer to that question. Why this torment?

This is a passage, symbolic, surrealist image, sort of like a Salvador Dali painting that draws every lost generation and people and place and time back in because while called the Valley of Bones, really it is better understood as the Valley of Hope, the Valley of Renewal, the Valley of God’s power to change hearts and minds...the Valley of empowerment...and especially the Valley of Love.

Let’s look at our art for the morning. It is entitled Rubble by Carmelle Beaugelin. She says, “It has been over a decade since by family in Haiti experienced the most traumatic earthquake in the nation’s history. If you were to google, “Haiti” and “Earthquake” images of collapsed concrete and rubble would emerge.

The most disturbing images are those of survivors, covered in white and gray ash and rubble, reaching out for rescuers to salvage them from collapsed buildings. Endless images are found on the internet of arms stretched out, identity-less faces of horror covered in soot, and faces frozen into expressions of despair by the spectating photographer's lens.

When I think of Ezekiel and the story of the dry bones, I think of those images. I've often heard sermons where pastors position God's people as the prophet to call the world into life, but what about God's people who are, as the bones, facing the despair of death? Their suffering is theologized away by those who consider themselves the righteous "Ezekiels" of the world, whose privilege weighs heavy on the bones of the suffering, like the concrete rubble in Haiti.

Rubble speaks to the realities of being made alive and yet not being allowed to live – a nameless multitude of God's people resurrected yet still bearing the scent of burial spices of their bodies.

Who are we in this story? As we the bones seeking life? Do we perceive ourselves as spectators of suffering? Or will we choose to be participants in healing as active agents of God's resurrecting power out of the rubble?

As I thought about our scripture for this morning, the vision of the United Methodist Church kept coming to my mind. If you have been watching the church news or twitter, you know that several congregations across the United States are choosing to disaffiliate with the United Methodist Church. Some are moving to the Global Methodist Church, the GMC, a new denomination recently formed. And some are choosing to leave the United Methodist Church and become an independent congregation.

This came to a head during our General Conference where church law is made. The disagreement lies in the interpretation of scripture and the rights of LGBTQIA folks in the life of the church. We can't come to an agreement about that. We can't even agree to make a statement that we can't agree.

There are churches in our conference that just won't discuss this issue. It is that elephant in the room that is allowed to roam in sanctuaries around the United States knocking over hymnals and disrupting choir anthems and sermons, but some won't even acknowledge that the elephant is even there. It's just a huge bump under the beautiful sanctuary carpeting that we step over but don't talk about. That can't happen anymore. Every church needs to decide where they stand in issues of scriptural interpretation and human sexuality. Silence is literally killing people.

We aren't really looking at a denomination that is splitting, it is more like people are just leaving and a remnant of the United Methodist Church will remain.

I started to think about that word "remnant." So I did a bit of a word study in scripture. This is what I found. A remnant is a left over amount from a larger portion or piece, whether it is food, material from which a garment is fashioned, or even a group of people. Remnants could be looked upon as worthless scraps and many times are. However God assigned high value to those people whom God had set aside for holy purposes. The remnant are a people of unshakable integrity, who love truth and are totally honest.

I believe the remnant that remains in the United Methodist Church will be one that needs to first and foremost must be a place of healing. There is no doubt the hurt and pain that our denomination has done to queer folks. From denying ordination, to calling them sinners in need of salvation. We who remain in this remnant need to first acknowledge our part in the causation of that pain. We need to repent of the harm we have done.

We also need to be ready. Because there are a lot of people who will be in need of a new church. When their church chooses disaffiliation, the place where they had community is no longer a place they can feel safe in.

We need to be ready to be that place. We need to be a healing balm for folks who are displaced. Someone visiting last week shared that their home church has voted to disaffiliate and said these words to me. "I always knew people left the church but I never thought the church would leave me."

That's why we read our welcoming statement every Sunday. So people are aware when they show up what we mean when we say all are welcome. We don't mean, all are welcome, but you better get yourself together in the way we think you should be to be a Christian." We are a church, not a courtroom. We don't judge hear. That's why we are specific in our welcoming statement.

Do you know what it means to hear that you are welcome, that who you identify is listed in our welcoming statement. It's a living document. We continue to add words. That's why immigration status was added since I've been here.

People are going to be needing a place like Central United Methodist. They may not be in Detroit, they may even be in a different state but they can still worship with us through live stream.

Can these bones live? Will they come alive?

The answer is yes. Yes they can and yes they will. Let me close with a poem from Rev. Sarah Speed called "The Answer is Yes."

It's the question as ask at the end of our rope,
when the storm is raging,
when the monsters under the bed have introduced themselves.

When everything around us seems to be on fire.

It's the question we ask when hope slips through like sand in a bottle,
when the mockingbirds stop singing,
when the news reporter leads with another mass shooting.

It's the question we ask when the depression moves in,
making herself at home, making a mess of it all.

It's the question we ask
when we're not sure if Easter will come.

Will it be Lent forever?
Will the sun ever rise?
Will this hope lead to something?
Can these bones ever live?

The answer is yes. Amen