

Bone Dry

Romans 8: 6-11

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Romans 8: 6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.

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O come, O come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel, that mourns in lonely exile here, until the Son of God appear. ⁱ

In this beloved Advent anthem we walk with the exiled Israelites as they heard the prophets' warnings about faithful living and calls for repentance as well as God's promises of hope, restoration and redemption. We hear the yearning of our faith ancestors over thousands of years awaiting the promised Messiah, waiting through exile, oppression, slavery, being conquered and the destruction of the Temple. They waited for, hoped for, a Messiah, just as much as we wait for a cure for cancer, hope for a cure for Alzheimer's. In Advent we wait for

the Messiah, the One, who will fill the whole world with heaven's peace. And when Christmas morning dawns with angels' Alleluias and a radiant Bethlehem star, our waiting is not over. When Emmanuel arrives as God with us — when the Day-spring is cradled in Mary's arms — when Wisdom cries in his manger—when the Desire of nations is visited by awed shepherds--we are reminded that redemption has only just begun.

In Advent, on Christmas, we see the infant in the manger and we stop there. We do not look ahead, nor do really think about why the Light of the World, the Prince of Peace, is asleep on the hay. Yet we must see the cross of Christ in Jesus' manger. We must remember that the Magi gave a gift of myrrh for the baby, yet the crucified Christ refused the soothing wine with myrrh. Advent is called 'Little Lent' as we are reminded that although we want to linger in Bethlehem, we must go on to Jerusalem. The poet Ann Weemsⁱⁱ wrote these words to keep us mindful of why Advent, why Lent:

If there is no cross in the manger,
There is no Christmas.
If the Babe doesn't become the adult,
There is no Bethlehem star.

We are now deep into the depths of Lent, and Jerusalem, Gethsemane, Calvary, are getting closer each day. Our journey so far has taken us through individual ways of Lenten reflection and repentance. And today we journey back with our faith ancestors who cried out for a Messiah, who cried out for saving, for redemption, when they had been through so much they were as dried, brittle, broken bones. Advent and Lent continue the journey towards the call and cry for the redeeming work of the Messiah, of Jesus Christ.

Israel had known rebellion, despair and devastation for generations. The land promised to them by God had been taken. They were scattered and broken. Their homes, their lifestyle and most importantly, the temple were gone. They were strangers in a strange land. Economic, cultural and spiritual challenges confronted them relentlessly on all sides. They knew despair, oppression, violence, devastation and corruption.

From his place in exile, Ezekiel heard of what had happened at home. In his grief, in the longing for the long ago promised Messiah, Ezekiel was visited by the spirit of God and taken to the valley of dry bones.

God called him to prophesy to the brittle and jumbled signs of death all around him. "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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." Suddenly there was a rattling sound as bones came together, as sinew and flesh and skin came upon them. Yet they were still lifeless. Ezekiel again spoke as God said, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." The breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

The once dry, dead, useless, lifeless bones were the whole house of Israel, all that had been cut off, all that needed redemption and resurrection. Into them, those living and those already gone to their rest, God's resurrection spirit was given. Into utter hopelessness dry bones in valleys of ruin and devastation could live again. Ezekiel's metaphorical vision was a renewal of hope when there seemed to be absolutely none. It was new life when all life seemed lost. It was God present when God seemed absent.

In this season of Lenten repentance as we journey towards the cross and resurrection, we are reminded by the valley of the dry bones of our faith ancestors that resurrection, redemption,

is not just a personal, an individual, act of grace, but for a nation, for our world. “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.”

In this season of Lenten repentance as we journey towards the cross and resurrection, we are in the middle of a valley full of dry, dusty bones as we await redemption for nations, for our world, for our time.

The brittle bones of the impact of fossil fuels on our climate, the animal species at risk of extinction, our addiction to oil, corporate packaging designed to last forever rather than breakdown for the good of the environment, bizarre weather conditions, are scattered across our global valley. We must prophesy that we were created to be good stewards, not abusers, of God’s gift of creation. Breathe O God, on these bones, with resurrection and redemption, breathe on us the winds of courage and hope.

The broken bones of the great need for affordable housing, for more housing, the bones for better mental health care support and services, the bones of food insecurity and poverty, all pile higher each news cycle, and for many, each paycheck. We must prophesy that we are to do to others as we would have them do to us, for this is the law and the prophets. Breathe O God, on these bones, with resurrection and redemption, breathe on us the winds of justice and equity.

The fractured bones of systemic violence, racism, gender inequality, homophobia, unfair labor practices, ableism, xenophobia, war and oppression are cast far, deep and wide so we fear we may never be able to recover them all. We must prophesy that we are to love one another just as Jesus loves us as we set our minds on the indwelling Spirit of God that is life and peace. Breathe O God, on these bones, with resurrection and redemption, breathe on us the winds of empathy and compassion.

The once dry, dead, useless, lifeless bones were the whole house of Israel, all that had been cut off, all that needed redemption and resurrection. Into them, those living and those already gone to their rest, God’s resurrection spirit was given.

The dry, dead, useless, lifeless, hopeless bones of our global valley are also not what they seem. Jesus is on his way to the cross and to the glorious resurrection of Easter. God breathes life back into what seems lifeless, rattling creative possibilities where there seemed to be none, redeeming gloom with radiant hope. Amen.

ⁱ O Come, O Come Emmanuel, lyrics by John M. Neale

ⁱⁱ Weems, Ann, ‘The Cross in the Manger’ in *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, Westminster press, Philadelphia, 1980