

Dry Places
Romans 8:6-11; Ezekiel 37:1-14
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A valley of dry bones. Dusty, grey, lifeless. Far from the first blossoms of springtime and the freshness of April showers, this text first locates us in dryness. The opening scene in Ezekiel speaks of harshness and abandoned struggle, air stale with the stench of death. In a valley so dry it might as well be a desert. You might even imagine a few tumbleweeds fixed in place, not even a whisper of air to move them across the dust. It is a grim and ominous setting, to say the least.

It is the setting of exile. In 586 BCE, the Babylonians seized Jerusalem and destroyed the temple built by Solomon, the center of the Israelites' faith life. Scholars note that perhaps Ezekiel was among the first group of exiles taken to Babylon, challenged to make the connections between this new life of exile and the struggles of life in Judah. This exile called into question some of the most basic promises God had made to God's people. We hear the prophet wrestling with profound questions of whether or not God has abandoned Jerusalem and the Temple, the purpose of the suffering of the people of Judah, and how God might move from a tragic history of struggle into transformation and renewal. In the treacherous times of the Babylonian exile, Ezekiel's community was living with the anxiety and uncertainty of such questions. James Wallace describes this community saying, "Ezekiel's vision is given for a people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of the spirit, a living death in exile in a foreign land. Their temple has been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either killed or dragged off into a foreign land. Ezekiel witnesses [as] the soul[s] of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones¹." I believe Ezekiel's audience would have heard immediately connected to today's text. It would not have been much of a stretch for them to enter that valley of dry bones, exhausted from the rigorous journey and life of exile.

In our context, though, such a setting can be difficult to imagine. We can probably wrap our heads around the idea of a dry desert. We may even have a travel journal that recounts an experience there. Personally, I can attest that there is no place on earth that is as suffocatingly hot as the Valley of the Kings in the heart of Egypt, where the sweat evaporates from your skin even before you can notice it beading up on your forehead. After this winter, many of us may yearn for the warmth that the desert image conveys. But such settings don't fully capture the separating isolation and struggle of those 6th century people of God. We have to go deeper into the valley, and acknowledge more than just the physical discomforts of the climate.

I wonder the ones that best understand this desert valley of dry bones setting are those who daily make the perilous journey through the desert across the U.S./Mexico border. Last October, I had the honor of travelling with a group from this congregation to visit with our longtime mission

¹ James A. Wallace. "Homeletical Perspective on Ezekiel 37:1-14" Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

partner Borderlinks² and explore some of the many issues along the border. We met with several women who, running out of options and resources to support their family, had taken the extraordinary risk of entering the United States through the desert. One woman, still haggard from the journey almost a week later, shared her experience. Her journey, like many others, began with a substantial payment to one who promised safe crossing. A “coyote” as they are often, and appropriately, called. But, as often is the case, the trip did not go smoothly. Across the border and abandoned, she and another woman spent days in the desert without food or water, fearful of many they met along the way in a passage lined with drug traffickers and violence. Her story moved all of us in the room, speechless at the tragic story and thankful for a safer ending, which we knew was a blessing not often found among the prickly path of the desert. It is named “The Devil’s Highway” by writer Luis Alberto Urrea³. Her story, and the many others like it, remind us that there is something at stake in the desert – life itself. Hearing them in the context of our Ezekiel reading helps bring the gravity that such a text deserves. For Ezekiel, it is a matter of life and death.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the lectionary places this text in Lent, at a time when matters of life and death are front and center. Lent ushers us into the dryness from the get-go. We place ashes on our foreheads, and are confronted with our own mortality, hearing the words of Genesis 3:19, “Remember, you are dust. And to dust you shall return.” Now, five weeks later, the reminders of our mortality surround us in Ezekiel’s valley. It is a deconstructed cemetery, a graveyard. It can be a haunting image, particularly because when it hits closer to home. Some of us are all too aware that our lives have a similar ending point to those bones in the valley – death and dryness.

As one of my friends recently noted, the season of Lent is ripe with drama, increasing tenfold as we approach Holy Week. It is not a time when we casually move through the lectionary cycle. Rather, it is a time when the texts challenge us to take our faith more seriously. Traditions of fasting, or giving up something to get a glimpse of sacrifice, attest to the solemnity of the season. We are called into reflection and penitence - to examine ourselves and be confronted with the reality of sin in our lives. We are sent like Jesus into the wilderness for forty days. Desert living isn’t easy. Theologian Stephen Collins describes it in this way, saying “in the desert all the things that we use to define our identities are missing, and we are left with nothing except what we have inside. A lot of us fear that we would find we had nothing inside, or only fear and pain, and so we never venture into the desert. In the desert there is nowhere to hide.⁴” In the desert we are stripped bare, and become exposed and vulnerable. The dry places in our lives are revealed.

Dry places challenge our faith in dramatic ways. They come when we have been going nonstop without a break and have lost our sense of direction. They come from the aftermath of conflict, with hurt feelings and broken relationships. They come when our prayers feel unanswered and we wonder if God even cares, or perhaps if God exists at all. Our dry places can leave us worn

² For more information on Borderlinks, go to www.borderlinks.org

³ In *The Devil’s Highway*, Luis Alberto Urrea graphically describes the journey of 26 men through the Southern Arizona desert, illustrating the tragic realities of life crossing the border into the United States.

⁴ Steven Collins. “Lent Identity” *Alternative Worship: Resources from and for the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: BakerBooks, 2003).

down, frustrated, and with a faith life that feels like it is as dead as those bones in Ezekiel's valley.

It can be difficult to admit, particularly within these walls of stone and stained glass, that we experience spiritual dry places. And who can blame us? We don't want to beat ourselves up or dwell in tough situations. We get enough of that outside of these walls. We would rather look beyond them and focus on the promise of restoration that comes from the oasis we see in the distance. To come into this place of worship and remind ourselves of the living water Christ offered the woman at the well; to skip to the parts of our text where God breathes life into those dry bones. And we will get there, don't worry. But before we do, let's stay in the valley of dry bones just a bit longer. Let's not skip over the challenging aspects of our life of faith, because it is in these very dry places where we might be able to learn the most. "Maybe God's question to us this Lent is, 'What can your spiritual dry bones teach you? What can you learn about yourself and your relationship with the world from the painful, difficult paths you are called to walk?'"⁵

In Lent, we take the skeletons out of the closet and bring them into the light. We sift through our dry bones, like archeologists might, and see what we can discover. As we excavate, we examine the size and condition of those bones for insights into how we live and work. We see those places where we are strong and those places where we are weak. In a spiritual examination, we may take note of evidence that our spiritual practices have been less than adequate, where our bones suffer from malnutrition. Our excavation and careful analysis of our bones makes us surveyors like Ezekiel. And our excavations are at once both intensely personal, and inclusively communal. Ezekiel isn't just observing one person's dry bones; he's gazing at an entire valley. As we gaze at the entire valley, we realize that our own spiritual dry bones are in good company, both here in this congregation, and around the world. Although their frequency varies, no one is immune from dry places. And we experience them as a community of faith, too. We hear cries of critics and cynics who boldly proclaim "the church is dying," or even "is dead." After gazing over the valley, God asks Ezekiel a pointed question, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

God's question reflects the most fundamental understanding of our existence, and it weighs even more heavily in dry places. In dry places, we struggle to catch a breath. We long for a sip of water, that which sustains and renews. In our Lenten humility, we recognize that despite how gifted and talented we are, we fall short of being able to sustain ourselves. We echo God's question, even making it our own, and wonder if we can have life again. The optimists might brainstorm ways to revive ourselves. We will pray more, open and actually read our Bibles, give back to others through service, and more. Then we look at our already overscheduled, hectic lives and wonder how we can make it fit. It seems like a daunting task, a challenge that may deter us enough to give up altogether. We are left worn out just thinking about it. In only a few moments, we are back in the valley, struggling to hold on. "*Can these bones live?*"

"O Lord God, You Know" is Ezekiel's response. His answer is an expression of faith, acknowledging that God is the one through whom all things come into being. Walter Wink notes that "It is the prophet who must, at each step of the way, speak to the dry bones. It is the

⁵ Katherine E. Amos. "Pastoral Perspective on Ezekiel 37:1-14" Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 2, eds. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010)

prophetic task, in a time of unraveling hopes, to declare the unimaginable, to assert the rationality of the unthinkable, to call the people to new hope, grounded not on the past but on sheer faith that God is about to do the impossible. It literally was impossible.⁶” In the midst of dry places, it can be hard to feel any breeze, much less God’s breath. We need prophets like Ezekiel to remind us of the work that God is doing, particularly when it seems like death surrounds us.

The promise of Ezekiel is that even in the valleys of dry bones, God is there. And God enacts something incredible. God breathes life into the valley. *Ruach* is the word in Hebrew; that same breath that hovered over the waters of creation, and filled Adam’s lungs in Genesis. Before Ezekiel’s very eyes, those dry bones are made alive, with skin and sinews and flesh. You all know the traditional spiritual. It goes, “leg bone connected to the knee bone, knee bone connected to the thigh bone, thigh bone connected to the hip bone . . .” and so on. But there’s something happening here that the song doesn’t quite cover. It’s about more than just the physical reassembling. This same Hebrew word can be translated as “Spirit.” God gives the physical, yes, but there is something more than just the literal happening here. What makes these bones live is the dwelling of God’s Spirit within them. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans, with the encouragement to look beyond the flesh and focus on the Spirit. Paul reminds his readers and us today that there is more to life than the literal. There is more to our Creator than simply giving us our physical being. Our God breathes God’s Spirit into us and moves us from the dry places into lives renewed and transformed.

Dry places can be the most challenging places to hear promises of hope. Such talk of transformation can come across as trite or patronizing, as if overlooking the very real challenges of our lives. The good news is the message of restoration and transformation in Ezekiel, as well as the one we’ll hear in two weeks, is not such a shallow approach. Rather, it is a powerful testimony to God’s presence even in the driest of valleys. Because even in, or perhaps better stated, *especially* in, our dry places, God is breathing. And the valley of dry bones springs to life with the triumph of resurrection

We are on our way to Resurrection. May we hear God’s question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” and in faith respond, “O Lord God, you know.” Amen.

⁶ Walter Wink. “These Bones Shall Live.” [The Christian Century](#). 1994