

The Winds of God

(1 of 3)

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Ezediel 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.

There is one important part of my life that my c.v. does not mention but that is especially relevant to this particular setting: From the time I was seven, and until I was seventeen, I spent eight weeks every year in summer camp in North Carolina. That was something my parents could not afford, and therefore, in order to make the experience possible for my brother and

myself, they would bring a planeload of rich kids from Havana to Key West, and then we would all travel several days by bus from Key West to Lake Junaluska.

It was an invaluable experience. For one thing, it gave me some understanding of this strange language y'all speak, where things are often written one way and pronounced another and where one does not always mean what one says. I remember the day my mother came to me, somewhat baffled, saying that she was surprised at the growth of Hinduism among children in this country. I had no idea what she was talking about until she told me that she constantly heard campers speaking of holy cows!

I, too, heard and repeated many things I did not understand. I remember singing and even shouting, "Them bones is gonna rise again," long before I ever heard or read this passage from Ezekiel 37 and long before I knew enough North American history to know what the song was all about. To this day, I find it difficult to read this passage from Ezekiel without somehow translating it back to what for me is the original version: "Them bones is gonna rise again."

I am still convinced that in the old spiritual there are insights into this text that most of the scholarly commentaries I have been reading completely miss. First, however, it is important for us to look at the text itself, leaving aside the old spiritual for the time being, in order to see what it says.

Ezekiel begins by saying that the Spirit, that is, the Wind of God, took him to a valley. The Bible repeatedly speaks of people being taken somewhere by the Spirit. We are so used to thinking of the Spirit of God in quiet, soothing terms that we do not fully appreciate what the prophet is saying. Perhaps, if we remember that the word for “Spirit” is the same as the word for “Wind” and translating the text into contemporary images, we could say that the prophet was “blown away” by the Spirit. He was blown away from wherever he was, from his daily chores, even from his daily religious rituals and devotions to a valley full of dry bones.

God asks the prophet if these bones can live, and the prophet answers: “O Lord God, you know.” The answer is too short for us to know whether it is meant as an expression of doubt or of faith. It can mean: “Lord, you know that they are as dead as dead can be. They are gone. Forget it.” But they can also mean: “Lord, since it is you who makes things live, you alone know if these bones will live.”

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No matter what is meant, one thing is certain: The bones are dry. There is no life in them. Of themselves, they cannot live. If there is to be new life in them, this can only be by an action of God.

This brings us to an important point in the faith of Israel and in the faith of the New Testament—and an important point for those of us whose ministry makes us particularly aware of created nature: Creating and redemption are works of the same God and equally miraculous.

The God who in the beginning, according to the Genesis story, "separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament," is the same God who in the book of Exodus parts the waters of the sea so the people of Israel can be liberated from servitude in Egypt. Or, since the theme for this gathering is wind, the God whose Spirit/Wind swept over the face of the primeval waters is the same God whose Spirit/Wind carried Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones, the same God whose Spirit/Wind made the bones live again, the same God whose Spirit/Wind blows from where it chooses so that a grown person can be born again. The God whose creating Spirit/Wind hovers over the waters of the lake in this campground is the same God whose recreating Spirit/Wind hovers over the waters of baptism.

Back to the valley. The bones are dead. Dead. Dead. If they are to live again, it will be only by a mighty act of the same God who called creation into being. That is why God says to Ezekiel: "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'"

Now that's strange! If the bones are dead, how can they hear? You go around talking to dead bones, and if you are not a prince of Denmark in a Shakespearean tragedy, you are just plain crazy. But that is precisely what God commands Ezekiel to do: "Say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

The reason is that the Word of the Lord is not just empty sound. We, in the twentieth century, have lost much of the sense of the power of words. We tend to think that words are no more than sounds with which we communicate ideas—or, as the medieval skeptic would say, words are no more than the wind of the voice. But it is not so in Scripture. Most especially, it is not so with the Word of God. In Scripture, when God speaks, that which God pronounces leaps into being. Or to continue the translation we heard this morning, when God sings, bones dance into being.

Referring again to the Genesis stories, which this text in Ezekiel so closely parallels, God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters," and it was so. And God said, "Let the waters under the firmament be gathered together," and they were. And God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation," and it did. And God said, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens," and it was so. And God said, "Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures," and it was so. And God said, "Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness," and it was so. Or, as we read in the book of Isaiah, "So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it" (55:11).

Now, in this valley of dry bones, where there seems to be no hint nor hope of life, God commands the prophet to speak to the bones. But he is to speak not just any word. He is to speak the word of God. And this is to be a word of re-creation: "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."

And, as in the Genesis stories, it was so: "And as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them." In short, God said, "Let there be" ... and it was so. Or again, God sang and the bones danced into bodies.

Still, as in the Genesis story, these bones in the shape of people were not people. They were not alive. Or, as the prophet says, "there was no breath in them." (There was no wind in them.) You will recall that in Genesis 2, we are told that "the Lord God formed the human creature from the ground, and breathed into its nostrils the breath (wind) of life; and the human became a living being."

This is a matter that needs clarification. There is an entire tradition in Western thought that tends to blame our human predicament on the fact that we are made of dirt, and that in this dirt we carry the breath of God. According to that tradition, our problem lies in that what is in us is material, and our hope in the spiritual. But that is not what the text in Genesis says. The text says, yes, that we are more than dirt. But the text also says that we are made of good dirt. This is the dirt that God made, and God saw that it was good. The breath of life that God has

given us has been given in order that this body of dirt might live—or, in terms of the passage from Ezekiel, in order that this body of bones and sinews and flesh might live. One is not complete without the other. When the Bible says that God loves you, what the Bible means is that God loves you, spirit, dirt, flesh, bones, and all. (And, let it be said in passing, when we seek to show God's love for others, we must show that love in concern, not only for their religious state but also for their physical and mental state.)

As in the two-stage story in Genesis, where God forms a body and then breathes life into it, our text also includes a second stage. In verses 9 and 10 the prophet is told to speak the word of God again. But this time he is not to speak to the bones. He is to speak to the wind: "Prophesy to the wind, prophesy to the wind, mortal, and say to the wind: 'Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O wind, and blow upon these slain, that they may live!'"

In the Bible, because of the particular location of Palestine, each of the four winds has a particular connotation. The north wind is usually cold and brings fair weather. It is a wind of joy and of promise. The south wind is variable, sometimes dry and sometimes humid, sometimes tempestuous and sometimes sultry but never pleasant. It is a wind of unpredictability and uncertainty. The east wind is scorchingly hot, gusty, and much to be feared by farmers and sailors alike. It is a wind of trial and testing, as for Jonah under his dead vine. The west wind is pleasant, bringing in moisture and rain from the sea. It is the wind of fertility and abundance, of promise fulfilled. For an agricultural community such as that of Palestine, much depended on

the winds and the weather they brought. Winds brought clouds of rain and swarms of locust; winds brought abundance and famine, life and death.

Yet, it is from all four winds--winds of abundance and winds of scarcity, winds of rain and winds of drought, winds of joy and winds of pain—that the prophet is to call the breath of wind that will make the bones live. The bones will live. They will live by God's power. But their life, like all life on earth, will come from the four winds. It will be a life of rain and a life of drought; a life of abundance and a life of scarcity; a life of joy and a life of pain.

In verse 11 we come to the interpretation of the vision. The prophet and his listeners are in exile. In the year 597 B.C., a large number of Jews, Ezekiel among them, had been forcibly taken to Babylon to live as exiles. Ezekiel's own life was shattered. The people were dejected, torn away from the land they considered home, and made to serve the mighty and unbelieving Nebuchadnezzar. The Psalmist well describes the mood of the times: "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?"

Or, as our text in Ezekiel says, the exiles are devastated to the point that they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off."

It is to this downcast and downtrodden, exiled, hopeless people that God sends the message of the dry bones come to life:

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 live, and I will place you in your land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it.

In other words, as in the creation story, God has said it will be so; and it will be so.

Now we can return to that old spiritual and really appreciate some of its insights. "Them bones is gonna rise again!" This is the tremendous, unbelievable joy involved in Ezekiel's vision: "Them bones is gonna rise again!" Others throughout Christian history have read this vision and written very profound thoughts about it. But no one got to the heart of its message as deeply nor as clearly as that unknown African American, probably an illiterate field hand, under a sultry south wind, who first sang, "Them bones is gonna rise again!"

Our situation is a far cry from the pain and the hope of that field hand, and from the pain and the hope of the exiled Jewish community in Babylon. Yet, as I travel through this our United Methodist Church, I find so many people who can see nothing but the dry bones. We are not growing. In fact, our membership is declining. Our inner-city churches are abandoned and dilapidated. Our rural churches are hanging on by the skin of their teeth. The itinerant system has become a system of promotions, much like that of IBM or Coca-Cola. Churches don't meet their apportionments. We lack a sense of mission. Our worship is not as meaningful as it used to be. And on, and on, and on. The line of dry bones stretches as far as the horizon. And we say, as

those of ancient times: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

And we try to fix it. We try to fix it by adopting the latest fads in management theory, in communication theory, in marketing theory. We try to fix it by livening up our worship with contemporary music. We try to fix it through programs of theological education and theological treatises. We try to fix it through camping programs for our youth. But the fact is, my brothers and sisters, that if in such things we lay our hope, then we are of all people the most miserable, for none of these things, nor even all of them together, will make these bones to live again. If in such things we lay our hope, the last word is clear: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

But that is not what we are called to do, nor is it in such things that we are called to hope. What we are called to do, as Ezekiel of old, is to prophesy to those old, dry bones of the United Methodist Church, to prophesy: "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. ... I will put my Spirit/Wind within you, and you shall live." To call on the Spirit/Wind of God: "Come from the four winds, O wind, and blow upon these slain, that they may live." To call all of us together to rejoice in the fact that "them bones is gonna rise again." And thus says the Lord: "I, the Lord God have spoken. I will do it." So be it.