

Seeking: Can These Bones Live?

The Valley of the Dry Bones; Raising of Lazarus

John 11:1-45 Ezekiel 37:1-14
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Today, the Sunday before Palm Sunday, we hear the story Ezekiel's prophesizing to the valley of dry bones, and Jesus' raising of his friend Lazarus from the dead. Today we are asked, **Can these bones live?** Let me jump right into our Lenten resource's connection of the themes facing us today.

When you find yourself in a valley of dry bones, when all hope seems lost, when death and grief surround you, with desperation you might cry out, "**Can these bones live?**" In Ezekiel's vision, God asks this question of us. Do we believe new life can come after death? Can we find hope when things are bleak? Can we really trust in God's resurrection?

While we look to God to carry us through the valley, God looks to us to embody hope for others. As we prepare to enter Holy Week, we remember how Jesus began his final journey toward resurrection: by returning to Judea after the death of his dear friend, Lazarus. As we walk through the valley of dry bones that leads us to Calvary Hill [the place where Jesus is crucified], **let us seek out the hope that will stir in us and sustain us.**

Yes, both of these stories are about **having faith in God so that we can have and live into hope.** While it is often easier for us to focus on what is wrong in life (including our own), and in the world, we are challenged and encouraged to maintain hope for a better tomorrow, a better world. The Rev. Danielle Shroyer, a biblical commentator for A Sanctified Art, the resource we've been using throughout Lent, helps put these stories in perspective in our time and place. She writes:

To be quite honest, **very few things feel more ridiculous than hope these days.** We're facing a world of climate emergency, war, a growing immigration crisis, a terrifying surge in hate groups, rising global fascism, technological overload, and, in case we forget, an ongoing pandemic. If fear were an energy source, we could all power our homes and cars for a year. What kind of particular insanity is a Christian, who stands before all of this and says: "God is love. Peace is the way. Justice will arrive."

If God personally came to my door and asked me if this world was going to make it, most days I'd probably say no. I'm not even sure our country is going to make it. **How will we not fracture** under all of this pressure, all of this collective anxiety wreaking havoc on every institution and system we have?

The good news for us is that God doesn't seem as interested in that question. The question God has for Ezekiel is something else entirely: "Can these bones live?" God doesn't ask if it's likely, or if the forecast looks promising. God doesn't ask for pie charts and percentages. And, perhaps best of all, God doesn't say, "Do you know how you're going to get out of this?" Because God knows, Ezekiel feels just as overwhelmed by that question as we would.

God asks: "Can these bones live?"

This is a question not of probability, but possibility.

What God wants to know is: "**Can you see past the rubbish, the damage, the crisis, the violence, the signs of decay... and can you imagine that life still lingers there?** Do you dare to believe—and even trust—that the power of life does not ever go underground in such a way that God cannot revive it in glory?"

Many years later, Mary and Martha must answer this question in the face of two contradictory realities: their belief in Jesus, and a brother who has been dead for three days. They understand enough to know that Jesus brings life. But now this question asks more of them: "**Do you have faith that life is possible, always?**"

Jesus resurrects Lazarus for many reasons. But I want to believe that a good part of his purpose was to answer that question for all of us who will exist on this side of Easter. **Can we trust that life is always possible in God? Can we find hope, and even faith, when we are sitting in a valley of dry bones and literal death?**

God doesn't ask us to believe the situation will get better. God asks us to believe that life itself will not, in the end, cower under the pressure of human destruction. Abundant life persists. This is what makes it eternal.

Even when we have that trust, God asks for more. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. Jesus told those gathered to unbind Lazarus and let him go. **This ridiculous, radical hope is ours not only to hold, but to proclaim.**

Where is fear or cynicism holding you back from seeing life right now? Can you find glimmers of God's abundance even in this valley of the shadow of death?

Both of these stories ask us to be active participants with God in proclaiming hope, and helping to unbind those who are bound.

- From your personal experience, what is your message of hope? What give you hope these days?
- As a community of faith, what is our message of hope? What gives us hope these days?

Jan Edmiston, a former co-moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA), has a daily blog entitled, "A Church for Starving Artists." In her post from just a couple of days ago, entitled, "**Catastrophizing as a Way of Life**", she reflects upon how messed up things are in our world today. **Look at how the news and social media impact us in a way that everything is perceived as a catastrophe, leaving little room for hope.** Yet, she adds, "I have profound hope in The Church of Jesus Christ

as a community for those who want the world to be different.” She goes on to share some of the **things that gives her hope these days**. She lists:

- Churches that love trans kids and remind them that God loves them beyond measure.
- Churches that partner with the poor rather than lord over the poor with toxic mission practices.

She concludes, **“Yes the world is a hot mess. And we can do better. And there is hope.”**

The last time I preached on the story of the valley of dry bones and Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead we had just closed down all in-person activities here at the church due to the pandemic. We were entering our own time of personal and communal exile. Hope for a quick return to “life as usual” quickly evaporated in any number of ways. In that sermon I mentioned how it was not hard to envision ourselves becoming part of that valley of dry bones.

Ezekiel's vision came after the Babylonians had destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and carried many off into exile in a foreign land. His vision brought hope for a homecoming with new life breathed into the community, into their dry bones. I encouraged us, as the pandemic continued, to look for signs of our bones beginning to rattle and come together, and to experience the Spirit breathe in new life.

Now, three years later, our efforts to hold out hope for the restoration and homecoming of our community of faith is coming to fruition. For the most part, we have become unbound from much of the entombing powers of the pandemic. Yet, for many, a sense of exile and entombment remain. We still see oppression, impoverishment, and injustice all around us. Therefore, **we must maintain hope in God’s restoration and empowerment, we must share that hope with others, and we must help unbind those who are still bound.** And yes, that often includes ourselves.

So , thanks be to God for this community of faith that puts such an emphasis on hope and actions of compassion, to one another and to those in need around us.

Yes, these bones can live!

Amen.

Resource:

Feasting on the Word

Resources:

“Seeking: Honest Questions for Deeper Faith”, A Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide, 2023.