

I

This Fall, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Hebrew Scriptures, which are also sometimes called the Old Testament. We haven't covered every verse, or even every book, but we've been reading and preaching stories from the Hebrew Scriptures in their chronological order.

Before we get to our text for this morning, I'd like to do a little review about where we've been so far. Remember, at the very beginning of the biblical story, God made a promise to a man named Abraham and his wife Sarah that they would become the patriarch and matriarch of a great family, that their descendants would grow to become more numerous than the stars, and that in and through this one particular family, God would bless all the families of the earth.

Eventually, Abraham and Sarah's descendants came to settle in a place called the Land of Promise, and about a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, they started to look like what we would think of as a nation. So here's where I need your help to illustrate what happened next. If you would all please stand as you are able.

Right now, you all represent what ancient Israel looked like under the reigns of Kings Saul, David, and Solomon, about 1,000 years or so before the birth of Jesus. The twelve tribes of Israel were united into one nation, and the city of Jerusalem was established as its political and religious capital.

But after the reign of King Solomon, the unity of the kingdom began to fall apart. About 900 years or so before the birth of Jesus, the united kingdom split in two, with ten of the twelve tribes breaking off to form the northern kingdom, and the two remaining tribes of Judah and Benjamin forming the southern kingdom.

So everyone in this section over here by the post office, you represent the southern kingdom of Judah. If you would, please turn and face the courtyard. And everyone else, you represent the northern kingdom of Israel. If you would, please turn and face them, and give your neighbors in Judah a grumpy look.

From about 900 to about 750 BCE, this was known as the period of the divided kingdom. Israel and Judah each had their own kings, their own capital cities, and own places of worship. Each kingdom claimed that they were the true people of God.

Then, in 722 BCE, the Assyrian Empire invaded and conquered the northern kingdom. The Assyrians destroyed the cities of the northern kingdom, and its inhabitants either died in the invasion, were deported out of the land, or just gave up and adopted the Assyrian gods as their own. The ten tribes of the northern kingdom disappeared from the earth and were never heard from again, and only Judah and Benjamin remained.

So everyone in the Northern Kingdom, please be seated.

In the next few centuries, the power of the Assyrians began to fade, and a new empire began exert its power on the global stage in the form of the Babylonians. For about a century or so, Judah hung on, but then in 597 BCE, the Babylonians were able to do what the Assyrians could not – they breached the walls of Jerusalem.

The Babylonians began a series of deportations. They rounded up the artisans and craftsmen and scholars and took them back to Babylon where they forced them to work for them. So everyone in the first few rows, have a seat.

Things went on like this for a few years, until finally, in 587 BCE, the Babylonian army returned to Jerusalem for the final time. The Temple that King Solomon had built, the centerpiece of the united kingdom's religious and cultural identity, was pulled down to its foundations, and the city of Jerusalem was left in ruins. Friends, please be seated.

II

That's the historical context for our reading from the prophet Ezekiel this morning. It's sometime shortly after the year 587 BCE. Jerusalem lies in ashes – its former inhabitants now either living as exiles in Babylon or just trying to stay alive in a wrecked and ruined Judah. And the promise that God made long ago to their ancestors Abraham and Sarah, that they would be a great nation, and that in and through them, God would bless all the families of

the earth, seemed broken beyond all hope.

So listen now for a Word from God from the prophet Ezekiel, beginning at the 37th chapter in the first verse.

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. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I 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." 7So 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. 8I 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. 9Then he said to me, "Prophesy 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." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11Then 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.’ 12Therefore 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. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Most of the time in the Hebrew Scriptures, prophets are sent with a message from God to a particular people or a particular leader. Amos was sent to the Northern Kingdom with a message about God’s demands for justice and righteousness. Isaiah spoke to the Southern Kingdom about a future king whose reign would establish justice and righteousness forever.

But not Ezekiel. Ezekiel was not sent to a people or to a king. Ezekiel was sent to go and speak God’s word to bones. Not just any bones, mind you. Dry bones. Dry bones that had been there a very long time. Dry bones whose previous owners were long dead and gone. Dry bones that would soon become dust.

God brought Ezekiel to the valley full of dry bones and asked a question, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

And the only logical answer is no, of course not. Dry bones are visual markers of death, not life. Dry bones signify endings, not beginnings. Dry bones testify to what once was, not what might someday be.

But Ezekiel was wise enough to know not to point out the obvious to God, and tried to sidestep the question. He said, “Lord, you know.”

And then God gave Ezekiel an odd instruction. Prophecy to the bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

And the text doesn’t say so, but I wonder if Ezekiel hesitated for just a minute. You want me to do what, God? The other prophets got to speak your word to nations and kings and queens, but you want me to talk to these dead bones? Really?

But perhaps Ezekiel knew better than to give voice to those thoughts. Perhaps Ezekiel had come to know God well enough to know that sometimes, God give instructions to do things that seem silly or even foolish, but sometimes the life of faith means taking the action and trusting that the feeling will follow.

And so Ezekiel prophesied as he had been commanded. And the bones began to rattle, bone on bone. And once the bones were assembled, the muscles and the tendons stretched over the

bones. And then came the skin over the muscles and the tendons. And finally came the breath. And a vast multitude stood on their feet, very much alive. And as it turns out, the answer is yes, God, the dry bones can live, if you say so.

III

And here's a little spoiler alert. A little less than six centuries later, a man named Joseph, a direct descendant of King David, will be engaged to a young woman named Mary. However, before the wedding service, Mary will be found to be pregnant. And when Joseph gets this news, whatever dreams he had about their future together suddenly become a valley full of dry bones.

Within the framework of the law, Joseph would have been within his rights to have Mary publicly humiliated as an adulteress, but he decided to break off the engagement quietly.

But the very night that he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Mortal, can these bones live?

Mortal, can a virgin conceive and bear a son?

Mortal, can a first century Palestinian Jew named Jesus of

Nazareth really be the Messiah, the long-promised one in whom all of human history and all of human destiny meet?

O Lord God, you know.

IV

I wonder, my friend, if you've found yourself encountering any dry bones lately? I wonder if you've found yourself encountering a situation in your life that seems utterly hopeless. I don't know about you, but these days, every time I turn to the news, I cringe. There is so much in our world these days that seems so full of death and desolation, devoid of hope.

Maybe for you, your valley of dry bones is closer to home. Maybe your valley of dry bones isn't something that will ever make the evening news, but it grieves you to the very center of your being nonetheless. I wonder if you find yourself encountering some dry bones.

I think for most of us, our instincts are to avoid the dry bones in our lives, or to pretend like they don't exist at all. Our culture provides us with all kinds of ways to numb and distract ourselves from the dry bones in our lives, especially this time of year.

But along comes God who says to us, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

God says, "Don't avoid the dry bones. Don't ignore them or pretend like they don't exist. Stand here and

look at them, and speak my word into the dry, dead places in your life.”

And I'll admit, it seems silly. Foolish, even. But I have discovered in my own life that there is much in the Christian faith that at first glance might seem silly, even foolish. It seems silly to eat tiny pieces of gluten-free bread and sip tiny cups of juice. But we do it anyway because the Lord commanded us to do it, and somehow, by the power of the Holy Spirit, this tiny bite of bread and this tiny sip of juice becomes for us the communion of the body and blood of Jesus. Sometimes, living a life of faith means taking the action and trusting that the feeling will follow. Sometimes, living a life of faith means speaking God's word even to the dry bones.

The truth of the matter, my friends is that there are no bones that are too dry for God. There is no brokenness, no hurt, no confusion, too heavy for God. There is no addiction, there is no grief, there is no despair, there is nothing in all creation that can separate us from the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ. God can be born into your messiness. God can still breathe life into the dusty places in your soul. Even as we approach Christmas, we are first, last and always Easter people, for the God whom we worship and serve is in the resurrection business.

V

Some prophets were called by God and sent to speak the Word of the Lord to kings and queens. Some prophets were called by God to speak

the Word of the Lord to the nations. Ezekiel was called by God to speak the Word of the Lord to the valley of dry bones.

And I wonder if in these days that is also the call that God is issuing to the church – to speak the Word of the Lord in the middle of the dry bones.

I wonder if God is calling the church to speak the Word of the Lord into all the places and systems in our world that have been passed by and forgotten and written off as worthless, dry, beyond hope, dead. God is calling the church to speak the Word of the Lord into the valley of bones of poverty, the valley of bones of racism, the valley of bones of corruption and lawlessness.

The culture in which we live and move and have our being would rather avoid the valley of dry bones, or perhaps even deny that such a place even exists.

I wonder if God is calling the church to stand in the middle of the dry bones, to stand right into in the middle of all the places and systems in our world that are marked by violence and sin and death, and to prophesy to the bones.

Mortals, can these bones live?

The world says of course not. The bones are markers of what was, not what could be. The bones are markers of death, not life. The world says that might makes right, and the only things that matter are those that you can see, hold, and buy.

Mortal, can these bones live?

O Lord God, you know. O Lord God, you know that might makes right and the one who dies with the most toys wins is a lie.

O Lord God, you know that a faithful act by just one person can make the difference.

O Lord God, you know that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth changes everything.

Mortal, can these bones live?

O Lord God, you know, and you call us to prophesy, even to the dry bones.

Thanks be to God. Amen.