

Facing Our Dry Bones

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Let us pray.

Monday we held it together

Wednesday we had stormy weather

Friday we prayed it all better

Sunday we heard the Good News

O God, open our hearts and our minds

To the leading of your Spirit

Guide us and strengthen us and never let us go.

And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight,

O God, our strength, our redeemer, and our rock of salvation.

And those gathered, who could, said: "Amen."

The prophets of the day were preaching a theology of "don't worry, be happy." The people had a theology that didn't work. They were stuck with a God that many felt had deserted them and a pain that would not move.

Then along comes brother Ezekiel willing to give no one, absolutely no one, a break. His message was simple and clear, "Judgment, verdict, and sentence." His view is the least sympathetic of the prophets, and he was. When the people refused to confront their sin and instead cried out, "How long, O Lord?" Ezekiel simply responded, "Very long."

You see the destruction of Jerusalem plunged the people further into despair. The pressure of unfronted pain had broken the tenuous strand that connected them to their faith and to their God. Face-to-face with their situation, with no place to run, and no place to hide, the stinging words of the prophet Ezekiel rang true.

It is only when the people can experience the despair and pain of empty theology, of moribund faith, and a God who holds them accountable for their unfaithfulness that Ezekiel comes to them with words of encouragement. He comes to teach them that after judgment comes mercy; after exile comes renewal but you have to have a deep, committed, convicted faith.

You see, Ezekiel realized that you can't rush healing; you can't make things all right until the

person is ready for it. Too often, you and I move too hastily to console the wounded, assuring them that everything is going to be all right. We feel the desire to help people feel better. In our rush to help we also rush to cover up their pain, to diffuse their agony, and ignore their misery before they really have a chance to experience the change for themselves. We don't want to accept their tears or their anger or questioning because we might just have to cry with them or admit our anger or face the questions we have for our problems. There is a difference between a band-aid and major surgery; consolation and rejuvenation; ducking and covering and rolling and standing before God.

Ezekiel's dream recognized the need, then, for the valley before the vision. You see, the vision of the valley of dry bones is more than a story about reconnecting some sun bleached ivory that got that way because of sin and faithlessness. It is the revelation of the transforming power of God's Spirit within suffering, within our suffering. As the old women who I grew up with used to say, "Mm..Mm..Mm."

These bones, like you and me, sometimes, were experiencing pain. There is the pain of the very real aches we have in our bodies and I am now old enough to be able to speak on that with authority. But there are pains that are like deaths that we build each day. There is the death of ability. Anytime you or I give up on ourselves or on others, when we pull out our warped human measuring rods instead of

God's rod of righteousness and decide that there is no longer any reason to trust because the possibilities are just not there for success. There is the death found in educational systems that no longer educate but function as large public holding pens for the intellect and the spirit. There is the death of hope when we stop believing who we are and who we can be are gifts from God. When we turn our lives into pools of wretchedness because we got it up in our heads, somehow, that a system or a person or some post-modern magic potion can do more for us than God's amazing grace or unyielding judgment.

Yes, there is pain, sometimes pain abounding, but through it all we must allow ourselves to experience our pain and disappointment. We must allow others to experience pain and disappointment for themselves and fight off our tendency to rush in and try to make it all better by offering them words of scripture that have no content, only structure; that sound right but that do not meet their needs; that comfort us but have no relevance whatever for the disaster that is unfolding in someone's life. In short, abusing scripture to make ourselves sometimes feel more holy, more pastoral, more faithful, more prophetic, more in tune with God. Playing around with God's words because we think that because we are in church every Sunday, Wednesday, Monday and Friday night we actually have cornered the market on righteousness. When we do this, you and I become like the people of Judah who did not heed God's words to Joshua, long before Ezekiel, to be strong and to be courageous.

We can't even begin to help others to grow in their Christian experience of faith because our watering cans are empty. We have little to say about developing a sense of prophetic hope twined with righteous actions because we do not have a gospel filled with the Holy Ghost. Yes, I said the Holy Ghost. We don't help others find their spiritual gifts, let alone use them in the ministry of the church, because we wouldn't know the Spirit if it came up and bit us on the bottom.

We can't be open to the inclusion of any and all Christians in answering God's call in their lives when we are stuck in our predefined categories of just who is included in that call and what they would look like, how they must act, and where they

must live to be acceptable in our church. We forget, my brothers and sisters, that this is God's church. God holds the mortgage and we are just simply tenants. No, they, like we, are so caught up in their sin they could not see how to move beyond their valley because they were intent on a quick-fix, jump-start solution to their iniquity.

And, probably, round about now, some may be asking, "Preacher [or Resident Prophet] are you saying we must live our lives in pain in order to serve God?" Now don't get me wrong, I prefer joy (in fact I've been accused of being a party creature by my colleagues at Union), but I'm not about to argue that we keep our lives in the household of pain. You see the passage tells us that God looked at the bones and then asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" My hunch is that Ezekiel wanted to say, "No," but he knew that probably wasn't the right answer. He knew the list of sins that made those bones dry in the first place. But he also knew the God whom he served was merciful and compassionate. So he does what I call "a punt" – he says, "Oh God, you know." And God told Ezekiel then to preach to the bones – God never lets us out of this stuff easy.

God told Ezekiel, "You preach to the bones." And, lo and behold, the bones connected themselves, grew sinew and skin. And when Ezekiel preached to the four winds life was breathed into those dry bones and they stood up on their feet and they were a great host.

Sometimes we are like those dry bones. Sometimes we are a gathered people of death and mortality, we have rushed in one too many times, we have sought one too many easy answers to tough questions that have pushed us into empty living. We are like those dry bones and we have absolutely refused to deal with our pain. And our questions from the valley we find ourselves in are: How can we see when darkness surrounds us? How can we see when pain is our only reality?

Like the xxxxx, I'm going to suggest that we have to confront our pain. We have to come to the point where we accept the inevitability of pain and stop trying to run away from it. Like Ezekiel, you and I have to stand in the midst of the valley, with God,

and have a little talk with your pain. Perhaps it might go a little like this:

“Pain, O Pain, I feel your presence. Its like you just won’t leave me alone and I can’t go to sleep at night because you’ve got your hand on me. Pain, I can’t make it through the day without you reminding me that you’re still there. Sometimes you come through some uncertainty about a choice I’ve made or a decision I’ve held fast to. Sometimes you come through illness, you just won’t let me go. Sometimes you come because I don’t love myself enough to realize that God loves me. Sometimes you come when we and the church are called to grow, to expand our vision, to open the doors wide, to let all of God’s creation in and we feel as though our pain and our faith is too big or too small to handle the diversity, too threatened to truly hang tougher and be the people the God, too narrow to speak a full gospel. Pain, O Pain, I can’t let anyone too close, because you might destroy them, too. They might see the depth of my struggle and get caught up in my misery. Pain, I’m tired of living in the fold of these old wounds. Pain, I’m tired of living in a silence that is not golden, its got me wrapped up in indifference, its making me cantankerous, I’m living in the backwaters of fear, and I’m scared to come out of my own house. Pain, I’m tired of this silence. It is like a lying compassion that is chilling and killing my spirit and leaving me empty and hollow and mean as a snake.

Pain, I’m tired of living against this xxxx vice you’ve got me in where I have no voice except laissez-faire, post-modern platitudes that bring no comfort in the wasteland of my heart. Pain, I’ve had it with you. I’m tired of living my life on the altars of spectacle and power and evil.

So I’ve got to confront you, Pain. I’ve just got to tell you a few things about what I feel and what I know about this wrapping you’ve got me in. I’ve driven off my friends, made my life-partner mad. I’ve become the kind of person they talk about behind my back. I’m living in wretchedness. And I’ve come to tell you that you’ve just got to go, you’ve got to leave, you’ve got to adios, you’ve got to portage, because I’m holding on to the watch-light, I’m making my stand with God. I’m going to live a life that’s filled with God’s breath. I’m going to be a witness that is woven by the sinews that come from the almighty. I’m going to have a faith that is covered by the flesh of a Holy Spirit that God gave me. Can’t you hear these bones of mine rattling with the promise of salvation? Come on, winds of salvation, God’s grace is getting good to me now. Hoo-ye. God’s grace! There through disaster, God’s grace - there through the tears, God’s grace; there in the agony, God’s grace; there in the ecstasy, there in the morning, there in the night, there in the mid-day, there in the sea, there in the boulders, there in the earth, there in the wind, there in the rain, there!

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