

Being formed into community—telling our stories into our fuller humanity
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Meditation on exile, breath, and jubilee

Ezekiel's vision could have been written yesterday. In this vision, Creator God takes the mortal by the hand and shows him a valley full of bones, "very many [bones] lying in the valley, and they were very dry."

If we let ourselves walk with Creator God and Ezekiel, we too see a valley filled with very dry bones:

- The bones of black bodies murdered by police and lynched by vigilantes
- The bones of those who've died of covid19
- The bones of immigrants killed by the heat of the desert and by cruel injustice at the border
- The bones of those wrongfully incarcerated and executed
- The bones of those whose bodies were stolen and enslaved
- The bones of uncountable indigenous bodies exterminated to make space for white settlers

So many, many bones of people whose bodies were disposable and invisible in life and now, in death are dry, brittle bones.

This vision, this clarity of sight and insight is given to Ezekiel while he's in exile. Israel had been conquered by Babylon and he, along with so many other Jews, was deported—cut off from their homes, their lands, their holy places, their place of worship. Exiled from life as they knew it.

We too know what it is to be in exile. We're still in our homes, but life as we've known it has been taken from us. We're cut off from that life. And we're cut off from our place of worship. We know what Ezekiel is experiencing.

As I dwelled with Ezekiel's vision this week, it was somehow oddly comforting to know that we are not the first ones to experience exile. We are not the first ones to be cut off from our place of worship. Exile as a result of conquest and deportation is not the same as a pandemic quarantine, but some of the experiences are the same. We are *not* the first ones to be cut off from our "normal" lives and to experience the hardships that go with it. Ezekiel, whose name means, "God strengthens," offers his vision to his fellow Israelites in exile to strengthen them. And his words have the power to strengthen us, reminding us that God is God and that we are mortals. And that God is a living and an enlivening God.

In the valley, surrounded by death—old, hard, brittle death—Creator God asks the mortal, "Can these bones live?" We know this question! We look around in the 2020 valley

of bones and wonder, Can these bones live? Can justice for black and brown bodies ever live here? Can *shalom* for *all* bodies live?

And Ezekiel, what wisdom and faith this human being has! In response to God's question, Ezekiel doesn't give his opinion. Ezekiel knows that in a valley of bones, the time for human opinions, for human knowledge, for human plans is long past. In the valley of bones, the *only* response is, O Creator God, You know. Only You know.

And to that response, God tells the human one to prophecy; and he does. And when the bones begin to rattle, Creator God offers another opportunity, Prophecy to the breath, and the human one prophecies to the breath.

In the valley of bones, of dry brittle bones, human vision sees death. In this valley of dry bones that we are living in, in the United States, in Elkhart County, when we hear the question, "Can these bones live?" as people of faith, our response must be, "Only You, Creator God, only You know." Our posture is obedience. We live trusting God. In the valley of dry bones, we live by faith.

And as we live trusting God in this valley, we hear the bones rattling. The bones coming together and rising up. Everywhere we look, dry bones are rising up! And we must also see that the rattling of the bones began when our exile began. It is as though Christians needed to be cut off from their houses of worship in order for the bones to come together and rise up.¹ We *must see* that our faithfulness does not depend on our gathering in church on Sunday morning. No. As churches sat empty, the Spirit of God was loosed in the world. And in our exile, we who are white and who have been blind are now seeing—seeing the systemic racism in our country. Books on racism are, for the first time ever, on the top of the NY Times Bestseller list. They're sold out as we white supremacists are clamoring to see with our newly opened eyes. The breath of God is blowing in the valley of bones!

This. This is what happens when we prophecy to the Breath as God tells us to do. This is the Breath of God bringing the bones together and raising them up. *This.* This is jubilee. But it isn't a romantic, or an easy, painless jubilee. Sometimes we read Exodus with a sense that, Oh, isn't it great that the "rightful" landowners now have their land back. But jubilee becomes much more complicated and costly when we think about returning stolen land to Native Americans now confined to reservations.

The joy of the conqueror is the pain of exile for the conquered. The joy of those who have their lands returned is the pain of those who lost the only homes they've ever known.

¹ This "seeing" comes from Alan Sherouse: https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/why-are-so-many-white-christians-suddenly-standing-racial-justice?utm_source=Christian+Century+Newsletter&utm_campaign=dfe4d18d52-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_EdPicks_2020_06_23_racialjust&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_b00cd618da-dfe4d18d52-82633155

The joy of our black brothers and sisters being seen and experiencing liberation and justice and equality *will mean* the loss of our white supremacy and privilege.

This is why the only response is, O Creator, living God, only You know. Because *our* vision is limited, it is such a gift to have Ezekiel's vision. It's a road map for us as we live in this time of exile. As we live in a valley of dry bones. We don't have to know the answer; we don't have to figure out the resets and redistributions of jubilee. Nor is our goal to return to "normal" or to return to our place of worship. Our goal, our task is to prophecy to the breath...to prophecy to the resurrecting Breath of God. To prophecy with the Breath of Pentecost. And to let God be God, an eternally alive and living God who will give us the breath we need for every reset, for every release that comes with jubilee.

And for us as a congregation, surely Ezekiel's vision is a roadmap for us. As we celebrate 50 years, this is our year of jubilee. How is God's Spirit working in us and among us in our exile? What resets might be asked of us? And when the question is asked, Can this congregation live?, can we answer, by faith, You, Creator God, only You know.

May we mortals let God be God
in our neighborhoods, in our world, at Fellowship of Hope.
And may we, in the fullness of our humanity,
may we prophecy to the Breath of God, that God's resurrecting breath may flow in *all*
bodies.