

Reflection on the Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

[Either read or [watch the video](#) of me offering the reflection.]

I do not want to stand in a graveyard of the unburied dead. I do not want to stand with Ezekiel in a valley where the dead have gone unburied for so long that all the flesh has fallen away or been eaten by scavengers and all that surrounds me are the very dry bones (Ezekiel 37:1). Yes, Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief, because I do not want to die.¹ I believe in the resurrection, with all my heart. But I don't want it to happen to me. I'd just like to skip death all together, all the messiness and pain and get to the other side. I do not want to die alone, on a ventilator, with no one who loves me at my side, with only dear, loving, patient, exhausted nurses and doctors in their protective gear keeping themselves safe from my death. And I certainly don't want any of the people I love to die that way. I'm pretty sure I'm not the only one who feels like this, or there wouldn't be so many of us cooped up in our homes and making our social distancing work.

So why read the Valley of the Dry Bones from Ezekiel during a pandemic? Surely there are more hopeful Biblical images we can look at. Images that are not so close to what we fear may happen to us, not some time in the distant future, but before the Fourth of July. Ezekiel has a way of painting a picture, so clearly that we can see it happening on a drive-in movie screen as we watch from our cars. We see the bones, we can hear the noise, the rattling (Ezekiel 37:7). It so vivid. But step back for a minute and actually follow the steps. God bring Ezekiel to the valley. God tells Ezekiel what to say and the bodies come together. God tells Ezekiel what to say and the breath of life, the breath of life from way back in Genesis at the very start of time, rolls through them. You can call it breath or spirit or the four winds and in Hebrew it is all the same word. It

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, "Can These Bones Live? The Christian Century 113, no. 9 (1996): 291.

isn't Ezekiel's breath, although God works through Ezekiel's words. It's God's breath. It's God doing all the work of bringing new life to a valley of desolation.

We're in the middle of a pandemic and we want to do more, we want to do something to make it all go away, to make it all stop. Of course we do. We want it to be like so many other situations we face, where we do and the world changes. We're also in the middle of Lent, where we remind ourselves that we are not in charge of everything. Just some things. So we stay home and shop for neighbors and figure out how to support our local businesses. We find work for folks who

have been laid off. We support the effort of the local homeless agencies who are performing heroics to get folks somewhere safe for those without homes. We continue to support the work Marguerite's Place is doing to help victims of domestic violence at a time when domestic violence is rising. We don't hoard, or we try not to hoard much. I may have more boxes of elbow macaroni than one woman really needs, but that was more absent-minded buying than intentional acquisition. We do all that we can. And it will not be enough. We need talented people to figure out a vaccine. We need talented people to do the loaves and the fishes thing on ventilators so one ventilator is serving more than one person. We do all these things. And it will not be enough. Because God is what can bring newness and hope into a situation we cannot solve ourselves.

That is the message of Lent. Do what you can but don't ever forget that only God is all powerful.

Notice this too. When God has brought life to those dry, dry rattling bones, God explains who those bones are: 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.' (Ezekiel 37:11) These are not the ones who were slain, but those who have survived and been sent into exile. They are the one far from the life they have known and they have fallen into despair. They despair because they have convinced themselves that God is absent from them, that God has written them off.

As a prophet, Ezekiel is responding to this despair with a simple and clear message. God is as near as the next breath you take.² God is the breath of life, the wind, the wind from all four corners of the world. Just breathe and God is with you. Sure, they are still facing great loss, still facing a present in exile that they do not want and did not choose. But God is there with them.

That is the message of Lent too. God is with you, even when you least believe it.

² Margaret Odell, "Commentary on the First Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14" from "Lectionary Commentaries for April 6, 2014: Fifth Sunday in Lent", Working Preacher, https://www.workingpreacher.org/wp_print_all.aspx?lectionary_calendar_id=467&print_type=comm&is_spanish=0 (accessed October 31, 2019).

Yes, we want a God who will rescue us from death, who will delete it from this world and find another way around that pain and loss, around the horror of those rattling dry, dry bones.

But what we have is a God who resurrects us from the dead, who puts an end to death by going straight through it instead of dancing around it. God creates life in the middle of grief, love in the middle of loss, faith in the middle of despair.³ We can do none of those things on our own. God does that for us. God resurrects us from our big and little deaths as individuals and as a community. God shows us by example that the only road to Easter runs smack through Good Friday.⁴

We may not want to die. We may not want to stand in a graveyard. But the message from God is that the only way to get out on the other side is to go through. To breathe the breath of life that has been there from the beginning. To breathe the breath of life that is always there, even when we are most sure we are all alone and God has abandoned us. Even when we are most sure that we are most worth abandoning. Breathe the breath of life in all its strength and power. We must act as best we can. We must recognize that God is what brings new life to situations we cannot solve by ourselves.

I am the resurrection and life (John 11:25) Jesus says. Not "I will be". But "I am".⁵ Right now. Right here. In the face of death itself. The message of Lent is to breathe that truth straight through the rattling, dry, dry valleys our lives.