

Story and Meditation: Dry Bones

March 29, 2020

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Ezekiel 37:1-14

by *Eric Anderson*

The 'apapane was really disappointed. She had been a part of the weekly 'apapane races for, well, for ever. It was really only about three weeks, but when you're new at something, that can seem like forever.

Oh, you don't know about the 'apapane races? Well, that's fair, because I've made them up. They happen once a week up in the oh'i'a forests, and the race is to find a cluster of oh'i'a lehua with a given number of blossoms. They change the number for each race to keep it interesting and so that new racers have a chance to learn.

The newest racers, for example, are asked to find a cluster with two or three blossoms, which rarely means leaving the tree and sometimes it's right on the same branch. More experienced racers fly through the forest looking for clusters of seven or eight. There's an artistic component to some competitions, where the 'apapane have to find flowers of particular shape, or color, or flavor.

The basic race, however, is simple. Find a cluster of three. Go. Sing when you've got it, and the first one to sing out (and count correctly) wins.

This 'apapane was new to the races, and kinda new to flying, and she wasn't doing all that well. Oh, she flew just fine, but not fast, and she had to concentrate on not hitting leaves, branches, and other 'apapane so much that she sometimes flew right by winning clusters without noticing them.

Complaining to her friends and parents got her, predictably, nowhere. "You'll grow into it," they said. "Just give it time."

She didn't want to give it time. She wanted to win.

On the day of this race, the branches were dancing in the wind, which was stiff and steady and hard. She hardly knew why she said it, but she said, "I really want to win this race."

The wind, though blowing hard, breathed softly in her ear and said, "Join the race for the most blossoms, and fly along with me."

She couldn't believe that she dared join the fastest, most experienced racers on their starting branch. They looked at her with astonishment. Two or three looked like they wanted to say something, but they didn't. Their number was nine. The starter bird trilled, and off they went.

She flung herself into the air and found herself carried along by the speeding air. In a few moments the other birds were nowhere to be seen. The wind dropped suddenly, and she fluttered into a tall ohia tree covered with lehua clusters. She'd landed right in front of a cluster of nine blossoms.

"Just a moment. They'll never hear you," sighed the wind, and then it faded away. She sang her victory song. By trusting in the wind, she had won.

Nearly six hundred years before Jesus' birth, Ezekiel was a sad man living in exile. He was a priest who had been carried away from his temple and from the people who worshiped there. He had learned that the temple itself had been destroyed by the very same empire that held him captive in its capital city. He wasn't alone. A lot of his friends and companions shared his condition. He was a sad man living among sad people being closely watched by the people who had destroyed his nation.

Bones. That's what they were. Dry, disconnected bones. Disconnected from their homes; disconnected from their place of worship; disconnected from their families; disconnected from their nation; disconnected from everything they knew of life.

Disconnected from their God.

How could the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the scattering of the people of Israel have happened? They were a people protected by God. They'd been protected before. Why not this time? Had the God they worshiped as the creator of the universe been overwhelmed by these foreign gods of Babylon? Or had God abandoned them? Were they alone and at the mercy of the merciless?

That's why Ezekiel had this vision. He – they – believed themselves to be walking dead, disconnected bones, bereft of spirit, abandoned by their God.

"Mortal, can these bones live?" asked God. "O Lord GOD," Ezekiel said, "you know."

Other prophets had their notions of how things came to this. Ezekiel, however, didn't raise that question. As Joy J. Moore writes at Working Preacher, "Just last week we were reminded, by no less than Jesus himself, that we miss the point when we suggest that blindness (or disaster) is to be considered a curse from God. One should also recall the error of the counsel of Job's friends, who sought to identify Job's 'sin.' Nonetheless, we find ourselves in this moment in a valley. Is this the place to which God has led us? May our answer first be Ezekiel's: "O Lord GOD, you know" (Ezekiel 37:3)."

(<http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5423>)

In the vision, not a real world experience, God then instructs Ezekiel to prophesy, that is to declare God's will, to the bones, then to the breath. He tells the bones to come together and they do with a rattling noise. He tells the breath to come to the now-standing bodies, and suddenly they live and breathe.

Then God tells Ezekiel to bring the vision to the exiled survivors of Israel. The message is simple: You are not abandoned. You are not cut off from me. You will live.

Margaret Odell writes at Working Preacher, "If the dry bones represent the living exiles, then, it turns out that the entire vision is concerned, not with the reality of death, but with despair. The exiles were the survivors, yet they have dug their graves with their fear of God's absence. To this hopelessness Ezekiel offers a startlingly simple metaphor of divine presence, the ready availability of breath. In just fourteen verses, the word ruach occurs nine times, and while it is variously translated as 'breath' (verses 5, 6, 8, 10), 'wind' (verse 9) and God's own spirit (14), we would lose the metaphorical force of this usage if we neatly differentiated between the meanings. Whether it appears in one instance as breath or in another as wind, it is all the same life giving force. And it is all from God."

(http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2070)

Here in Hilo, here on Hawai'i Island, we have not so far experienced a COVID-19 catastrophe. We know from friends and family as well as from the news that it has struck hard in other places around the world. I pray that the stay-at-home measures we're taking here in the state of Hawai'i will be effective and reduce its impact on our friends and neighbors.

The isolation itself may give us our moments of feeling like dry bones. Already the anxiety, the legitimate fear, has us rattled. We know it can get worse. We know, based on the experience of other states and other nations, that it will get worse. As Madeleine L'Engle wrote in *And It Was Good*, "If I affirm that the universe was created by a power of love, and that all creation is good, I am not proclaiming safety. Safety was never part of the promise. Creativity, yes; safety, no."

(<https://twitter.com/MadeleineLEngle/status/1244242922800852994>)

So we need to remember the dry bones, lying in their piles, no longer connected to one another, no longer breathing. We need to remember the clatter of the dry bones rattling back together. You know, that's the same sound the ocean makes at Pohioki these days, as stones the size of your fist flow back and forth pushed by the waves. We need to remember the summons to the ruach, which means spirit, and wind, and breath. Ruach gives life to the bones. We need to remember the dry bones restored to life.

As Karen Georgia Thompson writes at ucc.org, “What is there to be done for a people, for any community that loses hope amidst pain and suffering? Where are the words to help the community find God in the midst of their grief and loss?”

(https://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_march_29_2020)

That answer is: right here in the prophecy to the bones, the prophecy to the spirit, the prophecy to the people.

Like that young ‘apapane, sometimes you have to trust in the wind, the breath, the spirit of God.

Amen.