

Sermon: Dry, Dry Bones

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

by Eric Anderson

In 597 BCE, the Babylonian army surrounded the city of Jerusalem. Unable to resist, King Jehoiachin, who'd been on the throne in the nation of Judah for just three months, surrendered to the Emperor Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar followed a pretty common practice for setting up a conquered nation as a client state of a great empire. He removed King Jehoiachin and his officials, "the elite of the land," according to the account in Second Kings, and took them in exile to Babylon. He installed Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah as the new king, the client king, the "you're our guy and you do what we tell you" king.

Among the large number of captives brought from Jerusalem to Babylon was a member of the Temple priesthood, Ezekiel son of Buzi. Five years into his exile, he heard a summons from God to begin a prophetic ministry, telling the exiles that the disaster of their situation had been self-created. They had failed to follow the guidance of God and God's law. "Whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house)," God told Ezekiel, "they shall know that there has been a prophet among them." (Ezekiel 2:5)

It's Ezekiel we heard from first today.

Back in Jerusalem, King Zedekiah didn't learn from the failures of his predecessors. Despite the warnings of prophets like Jeremiah and Habakkuk in Jerusalem and Ezekiel in Babylon, Zedekiah chose to rebel against the Babylonians. This time the Babylonians took the city by assault, destroyed the Temple built by Solomon, and ended Judah's existence as an independent nation for over four hundred years.

Some time after hearing the terrible news of Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel had the vision we heard this morning.

Patricia Tull writes at Working Preacher, "Ezekiel speaks from Babylon, exiled from a country that has died, its temple and capital city destroyed. Like earlier prophets, Ezekiel understands this disaster not simply as the unfortunate result of Babylon's empire-building. To him, since nothing can happen unless God allows it, Judah's people and especially their leaders brought this devastation upon themselves by their disobedience to God."

Despite, it must be said, Ezekiel's own warnings. But now, Ezekiel received this new vision of dry bones.

Why dry bones? It was God's response to what the exiles were saying: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." I entirely understand why they'd feel that way. They'd spent over ten years in exile. If they'd had hope of going back home, it must have been fading. Now word had come from Jerusalem that the home they'd known had been destroyed. And... they had the not-so-comforting words of prophets telling them this was the result of God's anger with their behavior. These were, after all, the senior leadership of the city and the nation, the religious leadership as well. While I'm sure there were plenty who had the same talent for blaming anybody but themselves so flagrantly displayed by some contemporary politicians I could name, I suspect there were also plenty whose distress was deepened by an awareness of their failures.

"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

And God, whose word had been scathing, responded to their lament with a vision of those dry, dry bones. "Mortal," said God, "can these bones live?"

That would have been the question the exiled people of Israel were asking themselves. Can we live? Psalm 137 was written during this time by one of those exiles:

By the rivers of Babylon—
 there we sat down, and there we wept
 when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
 we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
 asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
 "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How could we sing the Lord's song
 in a foreign land?
If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
 let my right hand wither!

To Ezekiel, the question might also have been, "Can these people turn themselves about? Can they become more faithful to God in exile than they had been while in privilege and power?" I don't blame Ezekiel in the least for tossing the question back at God. "O Lord GOD, you know."

Can these bones live? These dry, dry bones?

In the vision, God told Ezekiel to tell the bones that they could come together, could grow muscles and skin. In the vision, God told Ezekiel to tell the breath to enter these new bodies, and to give them life. Can these bones live? These dry, dry bones?

The answer was yes.

That was the answer to the scared, sorrowing, and sorry exiles. These dry, dry bones can live.

We are not exiles here in Hilo in the twenty-first century – at least, not precisely. But we have more in common with those Israelites in Babylon than we might expect, more than we might care to believe.

One is that we as the Christian Church do not exercise the raw power or the cultural influence that we once did. In 1952, a group of scholars launched the United States Religion Census. The concept is a simple one. They went to the national offices of various Christian denominations – I believe that the first census included only Christians – and got their official counts from their churches. In that year, over 90% of Americans could be found on the rolls of a Christian church.

Late last year, the numbers for the 2020 survey were released. Since 1952, the project has sought to widen its reach. They get numbers from the growing number of independent congregations, and they have information from non-Christian religious communities, including our many Buddhist neighbors here on Hawai'i Island.

Now, remember that in 1952 over 90% of Americans were members of a Christian church? In 2020, 48.7% of Americans were found on the membership rolls of any household of faith. On this island, it's 41.8%. Across all the Hawaiian Islands, it's 41.5%.

Once upon a time our churches were the principal religious presence in Hawai'i. Today in Hawai'i County 1.1% of the population are members of UCC churches.

We are not in charge. Dry bones.

These last few years have been very tough. We've been through significant natural disasters ranging from hurricane to volcano to a global pandemic. They've stretched our resources to care for people, and the last one, in particular, strained our emotional resources to care for ourselves. We've kept at a physical distance, and according to family therapist and author Virginia Satir, "We need 4 hugs a day for survival. We need 8 hugs a day for maintenance. We need 12 hugs a day for growth."

In a world dominated by a virus transmissible by air, I doubt many of us have had enough hugs. Dry bones.

Each of you carries burdens that are unique to you, some of which others know about, some of which no one knows but you. They may be concerns about health or finances, about the situation of a friend or a loved one, about relationships that are suffering or about a car that isn't running well. If they're weighing you down, they're burdens, no matter what someone else might tell you about getting a real problem. Dry, dry bones.

To you, to us, to those around us God repeats that ancient word: "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

There is life for us to live as individuals here in this world. There are the joys of human relationships to be enjoyed, the tender assurance of a loved one, the restless affection of a child, the quiet companionship of a friend. There are the wonders of the world about us to appreciate and to share. These glorious mountains, this rolling sea, the birdsong and yes, even the chirps of the coquis. There are the spiritual depths to be explored. The constant presence of God, the healing comfort of Jesus, and the ongoing guidance of the Holy Spirit.

There is life for us to live as the Church of Jesus Christ. The simple truth is that there are more people around us who have not experienced the love of God than there are... us. These people are also feeling like their bones are dried up and their hope is lost, that they are cut off completely. How can we assure them that there is life beyond the very real and present struggles of this time? How can we assure them that the dry forest will again see rain? How can we assure them that, by God's grace, even the driest of bones shall live?

How? In love and compassion, we tell them our hope.

And God will breathe breath into them, just as God breathes life into us, and our hope shall rise anew.

Amen.