

“Hope in the Valley of Bones: Wondrous Love” Ezekiel 37: 1-14

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Will you pray with me? Lord God, rattle our bones and bring us to life. Shake our understanding and our hopelessness from slumber and transform it into your wondrous love. May this sermon and our togetherness today bring us new hope and love, Oh God who is our rock, our life-maker, life-restorer, and our life-keeper through love. Amen.

Today, God brings Ezekiel to the Valley of Bones (a place full of dead and decomposed bodies) where they are then reanimated into living people again. I always thought that today’s lectionary passage should fall at the same time as Halloween—it has a Zombie movie sort of a tone to it, don’t you think?

At the beginning of the story, before we get to the bones walking around again, God brings the prophet to this valley of death, right? And then God asks a weird rhetorical question... or is it a trick question? April Fools? It is hard to tell. “Mortal, can these bones live?” I [Ezekiel] answered, “O Lord God, you know.”

You know IMMEDIATELY that something wild, weird, and possibly dangerous is about to happen whenever God addresses you by the ONE title that all humans throughout all of history and time share in common, “Mortal.” This title and address means, “a being that will die and cease to exist, or one with a finite lifespan.” We know that God is up to something big when we are addressed by the fact that we are temporary— “O Mortal, can these bones live?” This is the question God asks Ezekiel.

Even stranger perhaps is Ezekiel’s headstrong, somewhat flippant, and almost exasperated response: “O Lord God, you know.” I picture him saying this with a valley accent. Why are you making me look at the reality of the situation for the house of Israel, God? Why have you brought me all the way to face this place of tragedy and loss only to ask me about the impossible and the hopelessness found here, God? We both already know the answer to this silly question- “O Lord God, you know!” Ezekiel doesn’t need a reminder that things are tough for his people and his calling as a priest.

So who was this prophet Ezekiel with such a direct and confrontational form of communication with the Divine?

One of my favorite scholars, Michael Coogan seems to be a big fan of Ezekiel and this passage in particular. According to this scholar, Ezekiel is a special prophet for a couple of important reasons. The first is that he was the first prophet in the Bible to be called to the work of being a prophet outside of the Holy Land. He is a prophet in exile who started his ministry while far away from home. He only received his call once already far away from Jerusalem in an unfamiliar context. While his contemporary, Jeremiah, saw the destruction of the temple in person before being exiled to Babylon, Ezekiel was taken to Babylonia in 597 and only learned of the destruction of the temple second hand

through what others told him while already in exile as a priest far from his sacred spaces to which he was called as a priest. So Ezekiel has to rely on imagination and stories to survive in ministry.

Secondly, Ezekiel speaks in the first person and offers one of the most orderly and linear accounts of any prophet in the Bible. This makes Ezekiel the favorite prophet of all of us who came out of the Presbyterian tradition- all in good order indeed. This is important because the story we are hearing, near the end of the Ezekiel narrative is the culmination of a life of prophecy—and it ends, linearly and purposefully, in hope rather than despair. Nothing is accidental or chaotic with Ezekiel—our Presbyterian-like prophet.

Lastly, Ezekiel is a prophet who has nothing left to lose. He has lost his home, his calling as a temple priest, and never even got to say goodbye. Coogan says something that sheds light on this prophet's text and Valley of Dry Bones when he writes that, "[This] passage is symbolic and does not mean actual resurrection of the dead, a concept that will not develop for several centuries."<sup>1</sup> So when conservative Christians misread this text as having something to do with Jesus and resurrection, it is a blatant misreading of the story. Ezekiel is a **surrealist** operating from a place of profound metaphor for a renewal of hope in a time of exile from power and complete and total despair. This vision is a symbol of hope for Israel in a time when all seems lost and despair prevails.

Verse 11 and following: "Then he said to me, "Mortal, 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.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord."

We are living in a time where the bodies are piling up in the valley.

The body of our work in environmental stewardship and climate change awareness for God's environmental justice is before us today in the Valley of Bones. We feel the pain of the decay and what feels like death as progress is reversed and the planet and leadership itself seems to be running now boldly towards peril and ecological and climate collapse. The body of environmental stewardship is at our feet.

The body of our work in socially sustainable and just communities, affordable housing, homelessness advocacy, and fair housing policy is piling up body upon body upon body upon body upon body with every new news cycle in the valley of bones.

The body of healthcare for all, equality and access in medicine, HIV/AIDS research funding, access to insurance, falls slowly at our feet in the valley of bones.

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The bones and vestiges of the body of civil discourse and the marketplace of ideas, and democracy itself seems to teeter on the edge of a cliff overlooking this valley of bones. Are they too about to be pickings for vultures of commerce and greed.

We see the bones of our work to end racism and to start sacred conversations on race... bones of education as school funding is stripped and curricula are replaced with convenient alternative facts... bones, bones, bones, bones,...bones of LGBTQ and especially Transgender equality and access to safe spaces and restrooms that match gender identity... bones of elder services... bones of Christian love... bones of mental healthcare.... “The Lord set me down in the middle of a valley; **it was full of bones.** He led me around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were **very** dry. He said, “Mortal, can these bones live? I answered... Lord God, you know” the answer to that question. Why this torment?

This is a passage, a symbolic, surrealist image (sort of a Salvador Dali painting), that draws every lost generation and people and place and time back in because... while called the Valley of Bones... really it is better understood as the Valley of Hope, the Valley of Renewal, the Valley of God’s power to change hearts and minds... the Valley of Empowerment... and especially the Valley of Love.

I had my own vision of sorts based out of this Scripture passage. The past two summers I have driven down to a place for continuing education which has a name that sounds about as comforting and hopeful as “Valley of Bones”—a sacred, thin place called Ghost Ranch in Northern New Mexico in the land of the Shining Stone Land Grant between Chama and Santa Fe. This is the land that captured the heart and person of Georgia O’Keiffe, a place that has seen legends of evil, a dark history of fratricide, crime, and murder... but that place of legends and ghosts has been transformed by the Presbyterians who inherited it in the 1950’s into a desert place of renewal, hope, learning, and peace.

One dry clear morning, this past summer 2016, I sat alone on a mesa called The Kitchen overlooking desert openness, colors, and the mountains that Georgia O’Keiffe loved. I was reflecting on the pain and deserted place in the world, the fear of the ongoing election cycle, and also the beauty of this planet and hope for renewal I found in Christ and Christian fellowship. I remembered that even in the when things are bleakest; rays of sun and experiences of deep hope and love can change everything! I remembered, as I do now, that what makes Christian faith unique is our stubborn attachment to hope... stubborn, indignant, unyielding, unrelenting, irrevocable hope that love conquers hatred, ignorance, and oppression.

Suddenly I burst into a song I didn’t even know I knew (have you ever started humming something without knowing what it is?) It came from somewhere in my soul, overlooking that desert of Ghost Ranch... the Valley of Bones... I heard myself utter the first couple of words... [SING CAUTIOUSLY] “What wondrous love is this, O my soul! O my soul! What wondrous love is this, O my soul! What wondrous love is this that caused the Lord

of bliss to bear the heavy cross for my soul... for my soul... to bear the heavy cross for my soul!" I feel the same way looking out at you this morning... what wondrous love!

That hymn has been my anthem in these dark times when our beloved projects, departments, and beliefs seem to be stripped down to their bones- and I think connects us to that vision of dry bones some 2,600 years ago in the deserts of Ezekiel's Babylonia.

What wondrous love is this that caused a community to rally and be present and show-up to support our neighbors at the Islamic Center in a matter of hours after a violent gesture threatened their community—over a 1,000 of us showed-up in love and care and pure humanity. Dry Bones were covered again with flesh.

What wondrous love is this that will be present this afternoon as many from around the community gather to the ordination of my colleague Sean at the Unitarian Church to ministry. Dry Bones are covered again with flesh.

What wondrous love is this that shows-up when Fort Collins strategizes together from ALL traditions and background to build 48 new Habitat for Humanity homes in the next couple of years at Harmony and Taft? Dry Bones are covered again with flesh.

What wondrous love is this in the morning when we look-up and see that God has given us a new day and we see the light of the sun reflecting back... winking at us from the rock faces of Horsetooth and Long's Peak! Dry Bones are covered again with flesh.

What wondrous love is this when Plymouth hosts a civil, polite, and constructive conversation with council and mayoral candidates in our local election as part of our Forums? Dry Bones are covered again with flesh.

What wondrous love is this as our denomination partners with the Disciples of Christ to bring relief efforts to those around the world in need of help and support. Dry Bones are covered with flesh.

What wondrous love is this... oh my soul... oh my soul... Can these bones live, asks God? YES! Yes, God they can and they will and they must—our faith and our love—and our hope demands it. We see the beginnings of the bone rattling and waking again!

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude... They say, '**Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.**' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the

land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act," says the Lord.