

Can These Bones Live?

Sermon Preached by
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Years ago, when I was travelling in France, I had the opportunity to visit a World War II cemetery not far from the Normandy beaches. I stepped onto a grassy bluff and saw row upon row upon row of small white crosses stretching as far as the eye could see. The silent witness of the thousands interred there spoke volumes. In the words of Langston Hughes:

*We passed their graves:
the dead men there,
winners or losers,
did not care.*

*In the dark
they could not see
who had gained
the victory.*

My experience in that Normandy cemetery is reminiscent of the vision recounted by the prophet Ezekiel in our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning.

Ezekiel was called by God to preach to the Israelite people in exile. They had been deported from Babylon following the devastating conquest of the city of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the destruction of its great temple, which had been the focal point of their religious life. Living as refugees in a strange land, their hearts were heavy. The opening verses of Psalm 137 capture their sense of dismay:

*By the rivers of Babylon –
there we sat down and wept
when we remembered Zion...*

Life was hard for the exiled Israelites. They were uncertain about the future. They had many questions and few answers. Hope was in short supply. After Ezekiel learned that the city of Jerusalem had fallen he told his dispirited people in exile a memorable story about a valley of dry bones.

In one of the most compelling passages in all of Scripture, the prophet describes a vision of being transported by God to a vast plain covered with skeletal remains. There does not appear to be any life at all there, only a barren landscape full of dry and bleaching bones. It is as if a great battle had

taken place and an entire nation had died. The image is stark and desolate. Then, as Ezekiel is being led by God through that chilling, silent valley of death, he hears the voice of God asking, “Can these bones live?”

Can these bones live? In a place that lacked any sign of life, it would not seem so. Yet Ezekiel offers this answer, “O Lord God, you know.” One wonders what he might have been thinking, what his tone of voice was, how he felt. Was his answer a statement of faith, spoken with quiet conviction? Was it a plea for divine help in the midst of such an overwhelming experience? Whatever the prophet was thinking and feeling, God saw in and called forth from him the potential to make transformational change. Trusting in the Holy One, Ezekiel spoke God’s hope-filled word of life to the desiccated bones and summoned the breath of God’s Holy Spirit to blow through them—and little by little, steadily and reliably, what had appeared dry and disjointed began to take on new substance and form. There was activity and sound and energy. Out of the old, something totally new came together. The scene pulsed with God-given vitality in a spirit-filled expression of life and hope. Reinvigorated by the breath of God’s spirit, everything was fresh and new.

It’s no secret that it is not an easy time to be a congregation of any of the former mainline denominations of the church in the U.S.A. in the early years of the 21st century. Sometimes the challenges of ministry can seem overwhelming. When the church you love is shrinking, when dearly beloved longtime members are sorely missed, when the way we were is so much clearer than the way forward, it’s easy to lose hope. We can begin to feel as if we’re being led by God through a valley full of dry bones. But that’s just when, as the prophet Ezekiel and the apostle Paul both knew so well, God’s Holy Spirit blows into our lives of faith and into the witness of the church, calling us out of dry, disjointed places, standing us boldly on our feet to proclaim the gospel of God’s love and justice with new energy and vitality filled with the power and passion of Pentecost.

Theologian and author Douglas John Hall has written and lectured extensively on what is happening to mainline Protestant denominations in North America. He asserts, “Christianity by convention and ancestry is largely a thing of the past. [The church’s] vitality depends not on religious convention, social habit, or family tradition but upon the inherent capacity of ... faith to commend itself to the minds and hearts of people.” And he adds, “Not only lapsed Catholics and Protestants, but countless human beings who heretofore had little use for religion are waiting for something ... to correspond to the spirituality so many of them insist they have even when they ...disclaim any religious affiliation.”

Friends, you and I are beloved children of God. We are disciples of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. We have been given energy and life by the breath of God’s Spirit and called to embody and speak the transforming good news of God’s love, peace, justice, joy, and hope. Can these bones live? They can, with God’s help. In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “The incarnate Christ needs living people who will follow him.”

To conclude this first sermon of 2013 on the theme “Can organized religion adapt to change?” I offer you the gift of a poem published last fall in the spiritual journal *Weavings*. Written by Steve

Garnaas-Holmes, a poet, songwriter and ordained United Methodist pastor, it's entitled "Practice Hope".

Practice Hope

***Look at the fig tree:
when it sets out its tiniest green leaves
you know – you can see for yourself –
that summer is already near.
Luke 21: 29 -30***

Dare to practice hope.
Dare to let the assurance steal upon you
that something is coming,
something greater,
deeper, not merely more,
but more so.

This is not cheap optimism
that can be bought in any market,
nor a careful figuring of odds
that can always be beat,
nor mindless abandon.

I mean attentiveness to the
dense but dappled energy
that rises within. I mean willingness
to be taken up,
to be wielded deftly in this rough world
by an art that is beyond you.

You are a thread in a tapestry
too large for you ever to see,
a single leaf in springtime.
Practice hope:
let summer unfurl itself in you
and then, only afterward,
will you know that miracle of which
already you are a living sign.

By Steve Garnaas-Holmes (poet, songwriter, and ordained United Methodist pastor)