

Peace

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

The first verse from our scripture today is quite an image - listen again:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. (Ezek. 37:1)

The prophet Ezekiel is describing a spiritual vision that God has given him at a crucial moment in his people's life. This is not like one of those dreams that you wake up from and can't seem to remember. This is a startling image - a valley of bones. A valley of death.

Is this a nightmare? Why did God want Ezekiel to see this? And why, on this second Sunday of Advent, when Christmas carols and Mariah Carey are blasting through our heads, do we pause to consider the prophet's vision in a culture that encourages us to dream of a White Christmas... not a valley of bones?

What does God want Ezekiel... and us to see?

A little over two years ago, blocks from our church, Leonard Shand, a black man, was shot and killed by local police. This tragic moment in the life of our community revealed fractures already present, sometimes papered over, sometimes ignored, between neighbors, between law enforcement and citizens, between how we see our city as place of relative peace and safety and how quickly a morning commute can turn deadly under a hail of bullets.

Every time I pass by the place where Leonard Shand was killed, whether I am in my car or on a daily walk, I can't help but **see** that intersection differently.

In a way, that intersection is a valley of bones to me:

- a place drenched in sadness, grief, anger, and hopelessness
- a place that reminds us of how violent we can be to one another and how fragile life is.

In this last year, there are likely other such places that come to our minds:

- morgues overflowing with COVID-19 patients and a tally of the dead that stretches on and on, now over 750,000 lives lost to a pandemic that continues mutate - a true valley of bones

- or school shootings, like the most recent in Michigan, when young people are taken from us by someone with a gun, where institutions designed to nurture and grow our young people are transformed into bloody battlegrounds

Perhaps you can think of other valleys and images in your life.

What valley of bones do you see?

To understand what God was showing Ezekiel, we must remember the time and place for the prophet's people - it was a time of **exile**, when God's people and their way of life had been crushed by a powerful empire and many of the community carried off into forced labor.

Last week, for instance, we heard the hopeful words of the prophet Jeremiah, who spoke judgment and affirmation from the ruins of Jerusalem. Ezekiel was also a prophet in the time of Jeremiah, but he was one of those carried away from his homeland. From that distance, he spoke powerfully to what God was doing and what the people were called to do in this moment of grief and loss.

Perhaps then it makes sense - Ezekiel is taken by God to a valley full of dry bones, because many in his community felt close to death.

No doubt, Ezekiel passed by the many graves of family members and friends as King Nebuchadnezzar and his armies laid waste to Israel.

No doubt, he could see those in his community who cried out in anguish at being separated by their loved ones and their land that had nurtured them.

No doubt, he witnessed those who wanted to give up on God for allowing such things to happen to them.

In verse 2, what is remarkable, Ezekiel is given a tour of this valley. His view is not from a distance but up close and personal. Maybe a little too personal.

What unfolds in this exchange between God and prophet is a remarkable vision - God dares to return these dry, crusty old bones to life, to take this space marked with death and transform it to life.

He orders Ezekiel to help accomplish this work, giving the prophet a word to speak to these lifeless bones. The transformation, empowered by God's spirit, the same spirit at work in Creation, the same Spirit capable of destruction and fire in the prophet Elijah's ministry, knits bone together, rebuilds soft tissue, muscle, and tendon, and soon these bones have become people. **And then breath fills them, the very breath of God, and the multitude stir into life.**

God tells Ezekiel this is the House of Israel - the people of Israel - who have been crushed and scattered, who have been seemingly abandoned and lost - who will be knit back together into one community and restored to life in the land once promised them.

It's a word of the future - a startling vision for the future - for a people, who like Ezekiel, didn't know what the future held for them. Would they stay in exile forever? Would their children never know the soil and landscape that had nurtured their parents and grandparents? Would the stories of faith they tell always be about a distant place? Or would they one day be reconnected to the very earth that nurtured them and grounded them?

In God's vision given to Ezekiel, the answer was yes.

What is also amazing about this passage is that the prophet has a role to play. He is the one who will do the prophesying. He is the one who will cast this vision of the future that God's people wait for. He is asked to speak to the bones.

Ezekiel's vision reminds us that even in darkness, God is at work.

Dr. Wil Gafney, a womanist theologian at Brite Divinity School, challenges churches and Christians to recast our dark/light imagery as a way of talking about God. Often, that kind of talk reinforces racial stereotypes - that dark is bad and light is good. But, as she teaches, "God does her best work in the darkness".

- in the darkness of a womb
- in the darkness of an evening prayer
- in the darkness of cemeteries and hospice centers and hospitals and memorial services
- in the darkness of a valley of bones

Sometimes, the dark moments and dark places are sacred. As a pastor, I can tell you, as much as I love doing weddings, I have been most moved by funerals, times when we are given permission to look at the valley of bones before us, making space for our grief and pain, and then to also look with God's eyes to that which comes after, a life with God eternal.

Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and philosopher as he pondered this remarkable vision, wrote that every generation needs to hear in its own time that these bones can live again.

How can God take an intersection like ours where a man was killed and turn it into a bastion of peace?

How can God take the life of someone struggling with addiction and restore breath and life to them and their hurting family?

How can God take the grief that we bear during this pandemic and knit us together more whole than we were before?

I don't know the answer to that, but I do know Advent is a season which gives us permission to dwell in the sacred dark and dream of that reality. To go with Ezekiel and look out at the valley of dry bones - to listen and watch for God's creative spirit stirring new images of how we might live together. To wait for God to give us that prophetic word that our family needs, our world needs, and even our church needs.

And then to turn around and paint a picture of what life can be like. To prophesy to a world in need of Easter! As Christians, we are Easter people, even in the darkness of the womb, in the darkness of the tomb, in the darkness of this moment. Even at intersections bathed in blood that cradle the memories and remains of victims of violence and injustice. We are taken by God to look out and envision something different, where all who have been crushed and ground down by this world are given new life, where shattered communities and lives are made whole.

Advent is an invitation for us to describe that vision of peace. To live it. To wait for it. May it be so.