

Can These Bones Live?  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
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How many of you are familiar with the old, fun song "Dem Bones" or "Dry Bones" as it's commonly called? It begins with Ezekiel crying out to "dem dry bones." Then there's the part that most people remember about the song, where the toe bone connects to the foot bone, and the foot bone to the heel bone, and the heel bone to the ankle bone and the ankle bone to the leg bone and the leg bone to the thigh bone. And so it goes, naming different skeletal connections all the way up to the head bone. "Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk aroun'... Oh, hear the word of the Lord."

I don't know if it's because of this song, or the simple fact that I often think about things rather cartoonish-ly in my mind, but every time I've ever encountered this text in Ezekiel, I've imagined bones rattling and snapping into place one bone at a time until the valley was filled with complete skeletons. Then they would dance together with some fine choreography in front of a beautiful sunset.

That's cute and all, but it just doesn't capture the power of this imagery of a valley full of dry bones really carries. The only skeletons I've ever seen in real life have either been in science classrooms or at museums where the mummified remains have a leathery cover over the bones. Neither of these quite capture what Ezekiel encountered in that valley. Note with me that these aren't just any old bones lying about, but these are *dry* bones. These dry bones are not recently dead, but have been dead a very long time, so long that they've dried up. They were way past the stage of decomposing. There was nothing left to pick off from these dried up bones scattered about in the valley.

Imagine with me the eerie silence in the valley as Ezekiel was being led in. Imagine the sound of the bones clattering against each other as they're being moved aside with each of his

steps, perhaps some of these dry, brittle bones even snapping beneath his feet. Imagine the smell of the dust rising up from the bones. Imagine the silent hush of prolonged death as it surrounds Ezekiel moving further into this valley. Imagine the sight of bones upon bones upon bones as far as your eyes can see. So when God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" just imagine his feelings when he responds: "O Lord GOD, you know." It seems like a disheartened response, one in which perhaps he, like those dry and dead bones all around him, had lost hope. He and those bones had understandably accepted the death around them.

This being the most famous chunk of text in the entire book of Ezekiel, we forget what brought him and those dry bones to their extreme state of hopelessness and death. As we rush through to the wonderful ending of resurrection, we forget that the people of Israel had been forced into exile. We forget that they had witnessed the destruction of their city, and even their temple was destroyed. We forget that they had been dealing with a great amount of loss, destruction, famine, and disease. We forget that Ezekiel had lost his wife and wasn't even allowed to mourn her death. This was a community that had experienced death all around them for quite some time. No wonder these bones were so dry! No wonder Ezekiel couldn't imagine seeing them live once more! They were as far away from life as one could get. Hope was just another word in the dictionary.

We can relate to this death, hopelessness and forgetfulness as we, too, find ourselves in valleys of dry bones. We can justify how we've accepted death as our fate. We also sometimes forget what brought us to our extreme state of hopelessness and death. As we rush through to the wonderful ending of resurrection, we forget about the Stonewall riots. We forget about Matthew Shepherd and Brandon Teena and Britney Cosby and Crystal Jackson. We forget about the LGBTQ youth who experience higher rates of homelessness and suicide. We are a community that has experienced death all around us for quite some time. For some of us, hope is just another word in the dictionary.

Mortals, can these bones live? Yes! Yes, they can! Amid all that death and even though Ezekiel seemed to be a bit skeptical and perhaps had even given up, God told him to speak life into

those bones, and he did. He spoke to those bones, and they responded! Some of us are called to be the Ezekiels in our time. Even as we have experienced loss in our lives, even as we may be ready to give up, we are called to speak to our losses and to the death and loss in the lives of others. Although we'd like to skip over the death and loss, having experienced it ourselves, it's essential in our ability to speak to the lifeless and dry bones all around us. Our familiarity with death gives power to the words God gives us to speak to those dry and lifeless bones.

And when we speak when God tells us to speak, those bones will respond! It can be difficult and quite unnerving to witness God's spirit move through that valley of dry bones, kicking up dust, creating terrifying sounds as the toe bones connect to the foot bones that connect to the heel bones that connect to the ankle bones that connect to the leg bones that connect to the thigh bones that connect all the way up to the head bones. It isn't always as cute as the song might suggest, as God's very breath maneuvers around and through those dry bones as the tendons and the flesh grow back onto the bones and the protective layers of skin hold together the previously dry bones.

Even as the Ezekiels among us speak God's truth to the death in our lives, it can be difficult and unnerving as we see God begin to blow wind over our familiarity with the death around us. The work of restoring people to wholeness often does shake up everything we know. People are resistant because we'd gotten quite used to the feel of death around us. We have gotten used to the eerie silence and the feel of one dry bone against the other. So when the Ezekiels speak God's truth and the bones begin to respond, it can be scary. It's important for the Ezekiels among us to hang on to the gift of God's vision as we can see the movement of the bones slowly taking form, as we watch the tendons and the flesh and the skin return.

But God doesn't stop there. It isn't enough that these dry bones have now been reconnected and have flesh and skin. No, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy once more, this time to the breath: "Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." Not only have these bones now come together, but God will have them live. Life

can be spoken into what was death for so long. Life is what God would have for every single one of us.

Some of us have been scattered in that valley of dry bones, mixed in with everyone else's dry bones for so long, that we don't even know which bones are ours and which ones are someone else's. Some of us have been without skin or flesh or tendons for so long, we've forgotten what it feels like to be whole, to be connected. Some of us have been dried out and disconnected for so long, that we're not so sure our bones can be connected and reanimated. This is a word of hope for us. Even as some of us have found our bones reconnecting, we no longer have to walk around as shells of people, turning to different substances or activities that temporarily fill the emptiness death has created in us. Through Ezekiel, God speaks to the very breath, instructing it to reanimate our bodies with life.

A third time, God tells Ezekiel to speak a word of hope to these recently reconnected and reanimated bones. God tells Ezekiel to speak to those people among us who say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." God has a word for us if we can ready ourselves to hear it: "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live..." God's spirit has been put within us all. We shall live!

God has a long history of giving life where there is none. Out of nothing, God created life. Into dirt, God breathed and life came forth. In the dead and decaying body of Lazarus, Jesus spoke and he was brought forth from his grave. In our ongoing struggle as LGBTQ people and their allies in a world that continues to do injustice toward us and brings violence and even death for these people of God, we can begin to see how God is disrupting those dry bones in the work of reconnecting and bringing about new life. As this nation slowly recognizes its ill-doing and is gradually working to correct unjust laws and as people around the world are speaking out against the atrocities done to LGBTQ people, God's spirit, God's breath is moving over those dry bones.

God is in the business of life! What makes this story so fascinating and revealing of God is that even in the midst of death, where there is not one iota of hope left, God is able to breathe life into those places where there's death. God is able to

reanimate valleys full of lifeless bones! Death does not have the final word. It never has and it never will.

In the midst of the death in our lives and in our communities, like Ezekiel, let's also discern the voice of God and speak life back into those places of death. Let's reanimate the love God has placed in our lives, whether with our same-sex, same-gender partners or different, whether with the people we like or those who make us shudder. Let's replenish the places within ourselves that we've let die; our creativity, our passions, our gifts, and even our calls. Let's be reminded that we are precious and good and a delight to God. Let us learn, maybe even for the first time, how to truly love ourselves. Let us open all our senses to how God would have us rise up from death and bring life back into the dry bones of all the death that surrounds us. Let us restore hope in knowing that with God, these bones can live.

Amen.