

**Rattling Bones**  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
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Several decades ago I had the privilege of traveling with 30 Presbyterian ministers on a 10-day pilgrimage to Israel and Jordan. This was a relatively quiet time in the protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, a time before the wall, and long before the more recent violent uprisings. We traveled freely between Israel and the West Bank, with no checkpoints.

Our tour guide was a Palestinian Christian, and we had the opportunity at several stops on our journey to meet with Palestinian Christian leaders who enjoyed a decades-long relationship with our Presbyterian Church.

That trip was a sobering eye-opener for me. I learned firsthand about the long struggle for a Palestinian homeland following the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1947, a narrative that is not really covered by the mainstream American press and barely acknowledged in the American public square, and now is the centerpiece of so many college protests.

I learned about Israel's slow annexation of Palestinian real estate beyond the borders created by the United Nations that has left the Palestinian people without much of their ancestral land or the hope of a separate nation. And I learned about the involvement of our government that has, in some ways, contributed to the protracted standoff. I left enriched by the Christian fellowship with our Palestinian brothers and sisters, but also newly connected to the utter sense of despair that was, and continues to be, a large part of daily life in Gaza and the West Bank.

Despair and hopelessness, of course, is nothing new. In 597 BCE, the armies of Babylon forced the capitulation of the rebellious city Jerusalem and deported the Judean king and many Judean leaders to Babylon (2 Kings 24:10-16). Ten years later, after Jerusalem had rebelled again, the Babylonians razed the city and its temple and deported a second wave of Judean leaders.

Among the first wave of the deported was the young Ezekiel, whom God later called in Babylon to the office of prophet. A century-and-a-half previously, many citizens of Judah's sister kingdom Israel had been similarly deported, had lost their identity, and had faded into the mists of history--the so-called lost tribes of Israel.

What's interesting about these Hebrews from Judah, who were dragged into exile in Babylon, was that they were not kept in prisons or even camps. They were free to marry, build homes, plant crops and exchange goods. Some became quite wealthy. They were also free to assemble, elect leaders and worship.

But the Hebrews had a hard time worshiping in exile because they never got over the destruction of their holy city and temple in Zion. They were not where they wanted to be, or where they were supposed to be. So, they lived with a sadness and despair that ran down to their bones. And they refused to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land" as the Psalmist says.

The future seemed a black hole into which their religion was destined to disappear. The potent symbols of their faith--Jerusalem, its temple, its people, and the Davidic monarchy--had been destroyed. According to the theological rationality of the ancient world, many exiled Judeans assumed that their deity had been defeated by a stronger deity from Babylon. The people wondered if their Lord was truly lord and truly faithful.

Often when people's lives have been interrupted by a great tragedy, they stop coming to worship. I used to think this was because they were embarrassed by their loss of a loved one, job

or health. But I've discovered that more often the reason people stop worshiping is that they have lost their vision of God. To stand in worship beside so many who are singing praise to the Lord just creates too much existential contradiction. It's a tragic irony of the soul that in the times we most need to worship, we find it most difficult.

Like the exiles in Babylon, we try to numb the spiritual pain by making life more comfortable. We work hard. We collect a lot of things. We buy houses, plant our roots, live quietly, and try to make Babylon as nice as we can. But however nicely we decorate it, Babylon is still not our home. And the day we deaden our longing for God is the day we spiritually die. Then the rest of who we are begins to slowly die, from the inside out.

Eventually things got so cozy for the Hebrew exiles that even after they were encouraged to go to Jerusalem most of them didn't want to go back. The old dream of living in the Lord's presence had died, buried under piles and piles of coping devices.

Today's passage from Ezekiel is graphic and grotesque. The image of a valley littered with broken skeletons being restored by overlaying sinews, then flesh, and then skin is something I can engage only because at the end of this graphic description the bodies are made whole and then given life by the breath of God. Rather than repelling me, Ezekiel's account of his vision has the opposite effect. It draws me in. It makes me want to know more about the mystery of life. What is the source of life? What renews life?

God asks such a question to Ezekiel: "Mortal, can these bones live?" This is a question about the impossible. And Ezekiel answers, "O Lord God, you know." Ezekiel neither rules out nor affirms the possibility of resuscitation. Only God has that kind of knowledge. Though Ezekiel does not know the mysteries of life and death, he does know that God's power extends over both the living and the dead.

What a difference such knowledge makes. It empowers Ezekiel to follow God into a field of broken skeletons, the bones of the house of Israel destroyed, and to address the lifelessness and hopelessness that as a survivor of the destruction he knew intimately. God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." That these words come from God, the source of all life, gives Ezekiel reason to hope for the impossible.

How foolish this must have looked. The Lord's prophet, standing in the middle of a pile of dead bones, is telling them not to give up hope. If I were Ezekiel, I would have gently suggested that the Lord first bring these bones back to life, and *then* I'll do a little preaching. "See," I'd say, "See what God can do?" But that is not the way of God, who calls us to believe *without* seeing. That is because the Lord's words always make room for hope. And it is God's spirit, God's breath of hope, Ezekiel reminds us, that brings us back to life. Hope rises up from our bones and chooses to believe in spite of how bad it seems.

It has been a difficult few months in Israel and the Palestinian territories, a tragedy for both peoples beyond belief. Hopes for a two-state solution, which is the official position of our Presbyterian Church, grants both the Israelis and the Palestinians the right to claim a homeland. But the opportunity for the Palestinian people to be granted self-determination, seems dimmer than ever.

Walter Brueggemann has written that hope proclaims that the way things appear is precarious. So, he says, we dare not absolutize the present. Don't take it too seriously Don't bank on today because it will not last.

In a speech given in 1992, three years after the dissolution of the Iron Curtain, Václav Havel, then president of Czechoslovakia, addressed the question "Who should be the guardian

and bearer of spiritual qualities in the realm of practical politics?” Havel was a playwright and a political dissident who had been imprisoned by the communist regime that ruled his country for more than forty years. In a startlingly rapid and unexpected change in world geopolitics, he was catapulted from the position of dissident writer to president. He believed that the spirit of hope, compassion, and idealism driving intellectuals, poets, and artists should also be infused into politics. In his speech, he said:

“It is, of course, improper for a politician to give in to depression and despair. It is even less proper to show this in public. On the other hand, I believe it would be a good thing if politicians were more emotionally committed, not only to their own political fate but also to the fate of the world. Rather than merely seeking to satisfy the many special interests and pressures they must accommodate if they wish to stay in power, they should listen more to the voice of their unique, individual conscience—the way poets do” (*The Art of the Impossible*, p. 100).

In fact, Havel urged artists to stop shunning politics and instead to help transform politics from being an art of the possible, by which he meant an art of speculation, calculation, and pragmatic maneuvering, into the art of the impossible (p. 8).

Why do Palestinian Christians, along with the vast majority of their Muslim neighbors, remain so resilient in the face of such despair right now? Why does the church keep pouring out its little cup of water into the West Bank and Gaza and other desperate places of the world where hope has run dry? Why do we keep visiting the homebound and those in hospitals when we have no miracle drug to heal them? Why do we commit ourselves to raise our voices in the political process when there is so much cynicism and a malaise of despair in our politics today? Why? *Because God is not done.*

So, as we celebrate the birth of the Christian church by that same Spirit which spoke to Ezekiel, may we take our stand beside this ancient prophet and proclaim our hope to the dry bones, "Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live!" *You* who gave up hope, *you* who gave up dreaming, *you* who think your best years are behind you. You who think the Lord God has forgotten all about your insignificant life.

To you, we say, "Arise!" Arise from the heap of your discarded dreams. Arise to discover that the Holy Spirit is rattling those bones, breathing life back into you. Arise to live with magnificent hope! Because the world is dying for you to believe that God is not done.

Amen.