

Ron Gilmer  
5<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Year A  
University Presbyterian Church  
Tuscaloosa, AL  
9 March 2008

*Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that as the Scriptures are read and your Word is proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.*

## **ANIMATING PRINCIPLES**

### **EZEKIEL 37:1-14**

Welcome to the Valley of Dry Bones, the site of one of Ezekiel's visions. All the death and destruction that we find here belongs to Israel. Remember Israel, God's chosen people? They are not feeling all that chosen at this point in the story. Babylonians have invaded, and suddenly, Abraham and Sarah's descendants are traveling---again---and nothing about the journey is as wonderful as the Babylonians suggested it would be. Ezekiel, a priest, is in the midst of this misery, and human nature being what it is, I suspect that he finds himself struggling with theological questions being asked in the privacy of his own heart and in public where the faith of a people is practiced.

All of which is to say that Ezekiel is probably stressed. When one plummets deeply enough into a valley, it becomes increasingly difficult to notice, much less appreciate, the mountains on every side. When one finds himself or herself in that sad and lonely place, it is possible to forget that mountains exist at all or that one has actually climbed a mountain and experienced what life has to offer from way up there.

Even if Ezekiel is not stressed, he should be! Israel's way of life is being crushed by stronger, self-serving and abusive nations. Religious and ethnic prejudices have become entangled with military and economic policies (notice that "policy" functions as a euphemism for "agenda"). One-sided wars are being waged (yes, that may be translated as "imperialism"), and when one group found themselves incapable of defending themselves against the attacks of others, they did as others have throughout history; they started fighting with each other. The violence of one nation or would-be nation against

another increases the violence within; one crime leads to another until someone is willing to pursue justice and peace.

If Ezekiel is not stressed, it is because he is not wired to PBS or NPR---definitely not FOX News. Nothing about war or imperialism is fair or balanced, and may God forgive us as a nation for acting as if it is. The point, of course, is that the world in which Ezekiel lives is not radically different from the one that we inhabit. One of the primary differences is technological. Meaning: the tragedies---the valleys, the gulfs---in today's world are more difficult to ignore.

On Thursday, bombs exploded in Baghdad, reducing 54 human beings to ash and dust. Another 123 were injured. Do you remember how the story unfolded? The first bomb detonated, wreaking havoc in the streets. Then when help arrived, a second bomb went off, claiming the lives of more innocents, innocents who had committed themselves to alleviating pain and suffering in the world.

Then there is the story of violence at a Jewish Seminary in Jerusalem. Rabbinical students were studying in a library on campus when an assassin entered the building. A barrage of shots went through the members of the student body gathered there. Eight students died; nine others suffered physical injuries. One of the thoughts that occurred to me as I began to absorb this story is, "This could have been the next Ezekiel" (and if not, it still is impossible to place a value on human suffering).

When I was in North Carolina visiting Lydia on Tuesday, I suddenly found myself back in Alabama (no, not literally; if I work that one out, I'll let you know). The story of Lauren Burk, the Auburn freshman who was brutally murdered five miles from campus, proved to be deeply disturbing. Then on Thursday, soon after I was back in Tuscaloosa, Eve Carson's story made headlines. Carson was the president of the student body at the University of North Carolina whose death was brought about by acts of violence on the edge of the Chapel Hill campus. Even though I know better, part of me still associates youth with innocence, and innocence and violence simply do not go together; in fact, the subjects do not belong in the same sentence (much less in the same sermon), and yet until stories like

these cease to exist, God calls the prophetic among us to rummage through valleys and bones and to cry out for justice, fully anticipating God's Spirit to breathe upon us and our neighbors and grant us peace.

The Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel's vision is a battlefield, and God places Ezekiel there to interpret recent history, to grapple with questions of meaning midst the rubble and to help Israel assess the damage. Whatever pressure Ezekiel may or may not feel is released, or perhaps bottled (sometimes it is difficult to differentiate between the two), in this vision. When I taught Old Testament (i.e. Hebrew Scriptures) courses at Brevard College, students often were fascinated by the psychology of Ezekiel's story. One student's observation that I remember vividly is, "All of Ezekiel's visions seem drug-induced."

In truth, many of Ezekiel's visions seem absurd (at least to us), beginning with the appearance of a four-headed winged monster from a stormy north wind. Each head has the face of a different animal, be it lion, ox, eagle or human being. A wheel descends from above, and then the Lord says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, I am sending you to a people of Israel, to a nation of rebels who have rebelled against me...Do not be afraid of them, and do not be afraid of their words." Afraid of mere mortals after this invasion from outer space? I doubt it, especially after God instructs Ezekiel to eat a scroll in the next vision. Bon appetit! When the film version of Ezekiel's story is made, surely Norman Greenbaum's "Spirit in the Sky" will be playing in the background during this scene.

Maybe Ezekiel's story is canonized to push the limits of reason or simply to provide comic relief? Obviously, Ezekiel is in the Valley of Dry Bones to be with a battered people in their suffering, as God sends particular people into our lives when we suffer and us into other people's lives when they suffer. It has been my experience that one of the most effective forms of pastoral care that we have to offer one another is laughter. To be given an opportunity to laugh when tears swell inside us is therapeutic, even miraculous, when laughter affords us the freedom to open up and cry out in joy and in sorrow to the Lord.

Ezekiel's vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, if taken literally, is enough to cause almost anybody to snicker. For me, the story of bones jumping up, cobbling themselves together and forming a Congo line conjures up images of Grateful Dead album covers. It would not have surprised me if tie-dyed teddy bears had shown up in Ezekiel's next vision (but, of course, they do not).

The story seems more appropriate for Halloween, but the lectionary does not set a schedule of readings based on the rhythms of the secular year. So this scene of dryness, destruction and death comes to us during Lent when we confront the inevitable: Yes, mortals, these bones live, but they also die; and Ezekiel proclaims ever so boldly that they may live again.

Remember this story is Ezekiel's vision; he does not present it as fact. He sees beyond the dimness of death, destruction and violence and is emboldened to dream. The scene before him is scary, scarier than most of us will ever behold on Halloween. He is haunted by a past that cannot be changed, and somewhere midst the bravado, fears that history will repeat itself.

One of the differences between this story and the ones that we associate with Halloween is that the ghosts and goblins who haunt the imagination at Halloween are spirits without bodies who rattle chains in one hand while swinging bags of bones with the other. In the valley that Ezekiel envisions, there are bodies without spirits, and God aches for them to breathe again.

God says to Ezekiel, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord." He does, and they do. God's Spirit puts them back together so that they have ears to hear when God commands through Ezekiel, "Breathe, mortals, breathe." Breathe, mortals, breathe, and breathe they do, and it is the Spirit of God---Sophia, wisdom---that animates them.

God and this Spirit animate Ezekiel's faith tradition inasmuch as they animate Christ's, and they animate ours. God as Father, God as Mother, Christ as Son, Sophia as Spirit: All come together to help us to face the violence, death and destruction before us and to pursue peace and justice beyond them. The bones of our tradition are our experiences of the God of Israel who, from the beginning, has sought

to bless all peoples of the earth. Jesus Christ embodies the sinews, flesh and skin in this tradition, as we embody his. We are his hands and his feet even as we feed on his body and blood. God's Spirit---Sophia---sustains our lives and our lives together by enabling us to breathe.

The animating principals (that's p-a-l) of our faith tradition point to principles (p-l-e) that encourage us on the journey, wherever it may lead, even to Valleys of Dry Bones. By God's Spirit, we are bold to proclaim God's grace, mercy and peace toward all men and women, boys and girls, in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Experiencing this grace, we are then bold to celebrate, opening our hearts and imaginations to the mystery of faith, even as we await an opening of a grave this Easter. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be the glory forever. Amen.