

Lent 5A Trinity Cathedral

### **Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones!**

We always have two dramatic stories from Scripture on this particular Fifth Sunday of Lent – Ezekiel’s fantastic vision of the valley of dry bones and then John’s suspenseful account of the raising of Lazarus. Those of us of a certain age and life experience can scarcely restrain ourselves from breaking out into a chorus of “dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones” as the First Lesson is read!

And then we wait with a certain dread during the reading of the Gospel for Martha to warn Jesus – just before the stone is rolled away from the tomb of Lazarus – “Lord, already there is a stench...because he has been dead four days.” I actually rather miss the King James Version’s rendering of this line: We used to read, “Lord, by this time, he stinketh!” Well, that’s clear!

The juxtaposition of these two stories by the lectionary has actually misled people, over the years, to believe that the dry bones story in Ezekiel is about the resurrection on that last, great day when Tradition has it that God’s people will be raised from the dead, judged, and either enter into the eternal life of the kingdom or be cut off from that life forever.

And, by Ezekiel’s time many Jews did believe that this sort of resurrection would happen at the end of the age, when the Messiah came. But that’s not what Ezekiel was talking about in this passage. Ezekiel was talking about the restoration and revival of the nation of Israel.

The Jewish people had been defeated by the Babylonian army and most of them – Ezekiel among them – had been shipped off into captivity where they languished for some sixty years. Now, there were signs that their long nightmare was coming to an end. So, in some kind of mystical vision, God shows Ezekiel this valley of bones and says that they represent “the whole house of Israel.” The exiles have been lamenting that their bones are dried up, their hope has perished, and that they are utterly cut off.

In fact it was likely during those days that the powerful words of today's Psalm 130 were written, "Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord/ Lord, hear my voice; let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication." The exiled Israelites were in deep despair!

But now God tells the prophet to inform his people that their present situation, with all its despair, will be transformed and transformed soon. He challenges his fellow exiles to look at their circumstances, not through their own limited vision, but through God's eyes. God will end their captivity and return them to their own land. That did indeed happen in 539 BC when the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland.

As the *New Interpreter's Bible* so beautifully puts it, "Can these bones live? Of course not! But look at them through God's eyes, and watch bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Watch as ligaments bind them together, flesh blankets them, and skin seals them tightly. Watch as God's **spirit**, which heals hopelessness, **infuses** them, so that they rise up – a great army testifying to the power of Yahweh. Can corpses be brought forth from graves and become living beings again? Absurd! But look through God's eyes, and watch them stand up, receive God's spirit, and return home. When we raise our vision to look beyond what our mundane eyes can see, we watch the impossible happen through God's eyes." (Volume VI, pages 1503-1504)

And notice this: the agent of this kind of renewal and restoration is none other than the very spirit of God. The same spirit which Paul tells us in the Epistle today brings "life and peace." The same spirit by which Jesus shattered the power of death in John's Gospel and called forth Lazarus from his tomb. The same spirit, by the way, which animates you and me, and your common life right here at Trinity Cathedral.

I don't believe we were ever in the valley of dry bones at this Cathedral. But when I look at what you were like when I came as interim dean in 2009 and compare that to the kind of worship and service I see emanating from this place every week and every month as you celebrate your 175th year, I can only see "bones rushing to their appropriate partners, ligaments being bound together, and

people receiving God's spirit and raising their vision to look beyond what their mundane eyes can see, and watch the impossible happen!"

We can pray for that same spirit of renewal for our own Diocese of Iowa as Bishop Scarfe, and his team, complete a series of revival services across our state. A similar effort is underway nationally led by our dynamic Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. As I understand it, on May 6 our diocese will load up two charter buses and travel as a group to Kansas City to participate in the Presiding Bishop's revival "Awakening the Spirit" at the Kansas City Power and Light District. What a great venue for this event!

Of such modest beginnings, powerful spiritual renewal movements have begun. The Reformation...the Oxford Movement...the Great Awakening...the Azusa Street Revival. Let's pray for a similar revival in our day.

The late Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, once said that Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dried bones bears no date because **every generation** needs to hear **in its own time** that these bones can live again.

(Repeat) When many of us today look around at our country and our world and even our church, we too may feel at times like we are as good as dead. Many people feel null and void in these days.

But Ezekiel's vision is telling us that if we look through God's eyes, we can see the bigger picture and find reasons for hope. God can sustain us and fill the fear and emptiness of our lives with hope. Is it possible? Can these bones live? Absolutely not the skeptics say. But look with God's eyes... and watch it happen! (N.I.B. Volume VI, page 1504)

C. Christopher Epting April 2, 2017