

(Ezekiel 37:1-14 NRSV)

¹ 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. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

I answered, "O LORD GOD, you know."

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the LORD GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the LORD GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the LORD GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

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Dried Up but for the Spirit of God

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14

A couple of weeks ago I was in New Orleans, or as the natives call it, Nawlins. I was there to chair the international Association for Theological Field Education steering committee. The steering committee members come from all over the U.S. and Canada, so we can meet almost anywhere. We thought New Orleans would have nice weather at the beginning of March. We were wrong. The whole time we were there it was warmer in Boston than it was in New Orleans. The Big Easy turned out to be the Big Chill.

Nonetheless, it was an interesting trip. Our Association functions on a shoestring, so we stay in an odd assortment of places when we travel. In New Orleans we stayed at the Center for Jesus the Lord. The Center for Jesus the Lord had seen better days. The hallways were full of ladders and paint cans where they were repairing leaks from a hailstorm. The bathrooms had that first generation of plumbing, where sinks and shower stalls are bolted to the walls and exposed pipes are run along the walls and through the floors. But there was air conditioning. Indeed, there were signs everywhere asking us to shut the doors because the air conditioning was on, not a very comforting reality when the outside temperature was in the 20s. We held our meetings with some of our group wrapped in blankets. In that vague and indefinite way of using the word, our accommodations were interesting. But as Eliot's magi said of the stable in Bethlehem, they were also satisfactory.

But the really interesting feature of the Center for Jesus the Lord to me was that it began as a Carmelite monastery. For many decades young women religious would enter cloistered life at the Center and never again venture into the world.

Even today the sanctuary bears the marks of this older era. The church used to have public Masses. But the Carmelite Sisters attended the Masses shielded behind a mesh screen, so that no one could see them. We were told that the Sisters' family members would often attend Mass, and they would sit almost in the same room, attending Mass together, but never would the family members lay eyes on the Sister, never in their lifetime. She remained cloistered behind the fretwork.

I found it an extraordinary thing to imagine. Often as a teenager a young woman would enter the novitiate and remain in the order, away from family and the world for the remainder of her life.

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And how did the Carmelite Sisters at this cloistered monastery spend their time. They spent some part of it working, tending the gardens and shrines within the monastery. I'm told that this group produced and supplied the communion host for most of the churches in the South.

But what they did most of the time was pray. The Carmelite Sisters prayed hour upon hour, day in and day out for the world. Cloistered behind the monastery walls, they prayed endlessly for the world. They prayed because they believed that their prayers had an effect.

Now, I have to confess that this idea of closing oneself behind monastery walls and praying for the world was a bit of a stretch for this old New England Protestant. Congregationalists come from the Puritan heritage. And even those crusty old forbears, those strict Calvinists who thought that some were elect and some were damned, even those old forbears of ours thought that if you wanted something to happen you had better work at it. In the United Church of Christ we are heirs to this way of thinking. We are a people dedicated to justice and doing something.

We are often suspicious of prayer, or at least suspicious of those who talk of the power of prayer. We are more comfortable saying, "I believe that prayer helps the person praying, because when you pray, you turn your mind and your heart toward God, or toward good and kind ways of being." We even go so far as to say, "Prayer may help those who are being prayed for because they know that they are cared for." But I think a lot of people are less clear that praying itself has the power to change things.

My father may have captured the feeling as well as I have heard it. Some years ago when I first took up a serious prayer and meditation practice, my father responded in disbelief. He told my brother, "I can't believe that Dudley is sitting around on a cushion waiting for something good to happen. If he wants something good to happen, he better get up and do something about it." There you have it, good old New England Protestantism at its most succinct.

My father would have told the Carmelite Sisters in New Orleans, "If you want something good to happen, you better get up and do something about it." And I bet he wouldn't have been alone.

*** Ezekiel had a vision a dream. He saw a desert valley littered with dry lifeless bones. Ezekiel's vision was his image of Israel. Ezekiel lived and prophesied through the darkest moment in ancient Israel's history. The last remnant of David's glory was extinguished by Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar easily crushed God's chosen people and carried them off into exile. It was no contest. Israel's empire never was much by empire standards. And it had never, even at its height, had an army that would give Babylon a fight. Israel was but a flea easily swatted by the powers of the world. So, Ezekiel's message is fitting. Israel is but lifeless, dry bones lying brittle in the desert.

I think it is moments such as these, moments when the bottom has fallen out, I think it is when one sits on the ash heap that put one's theology is put to the test. The New England Protestant sentiment to get up and do something would have been dishonest and cruel in Israel's situation. Israel was utterly defeated. Israel was but dry bones. Israel had no sinews, no flesh, no skin, no breath, no life. And so Ezekiel was wise enough to answer the Lord cautiously. The

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Lord asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” And Ezekiel was wise enough to avoid saying, “Sure, they can live. These bones can live and thrive, if they would just get up and do something to restore themselves.” Ezekiel was wise enough to throw the question back to the only force and being that had the power to make a difference in this situation. Can these bones live? Ezekiel said, “O Lord God, you know.”

And how many times we, all of us, face situations such as these! Friends contract diseases that no doctor can cure. Parents grow old, and we watch their minds betray them. Our loved ones die. Our world groans under the strain of hatred and warfare and injustice. Misunderstanding joins with violence and leads to a cycle of deeper misunderstanding and violence. And for many of us our first and right response is to say, “We need to do something about this.” And we do. We need to do something. And many of us do do something. But more and more I am convinced that this doing something is not enough. If we are honest, the problems we face are often large enough and often intractable enough and often persistent enough that we need help beyond anything all our good work can do.

*** We are left with a riddle. There are things in life and death and the world that seem beyond our capacity to change. Even our best efforts are destined to fall short. So we ask, Can these bones live? Like Ezekiel we know that we may not be able to make them live. But what do we think about God, or about prayer? Is praying just sitting around waiting for something good to happen? Or is it at best just a psychological help to the people involved?

The Carmelite Sisters prayed unceasingly. Were their lives simply a waste of time behind the cloister walls?

Maybe not. Columbia University has just published the results of a study in “The Journal of Reproductive Medicine.” The results so embarrassed the thoroughly scientific researchers that they published apologetically. Since they could not account for the results, they were tempted to ignore the study. But then they decided that ignoring it wasn’t very good science either.

The research was a very well controlled study involving 199 women who were undergoing in vitro fertilization. The amazing thing about this study is that it was completely blind. None of the women, the physicians or other medical personnel even knew there was a study going on. The researchers had were not employed by any religious organization, nor did they perform the research at the request of any religious organization.

The researchers randomly divided the group of 199 women in half, 100 in one group and 99 in the other. One half of the women had people praying for them, the other half did not. But those who did the praying did not know the people they were praying for, and had no way of contacting them, either. In fact, the people praying were randomly selected and were from other far away countries. The people who performed the prayers were simply provided a picture of the women they were praying for. So, here you have a study. None of the participants, neither subjects nor their physicians, were aware they were in one. There was no relationship whatsoever between the women and those who were praying for them. And it was conducted by a major scientific university. The results: the women who were prayed for had 100% more pregnancies than the women who were not. The researchers analyzed the data every way they

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could to find some other variable which accounted for the results, but no matter how they tried, they could not alter the outcome. The women who were prayed for had twice as many pregnancies as those who were not prayed for. I have put a link on our website to the article about the research on the Columbia University website.

The Lord commanded Elijah to pray. Elijah was to say, “O dry bones hear the word of the Lord. God will put breath in you, and you will live. God will put muscles and flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you will live. You will know that God is your God.”

Elijah looked at the dry bones strewn before him. Elijah looked at the dry bones that he was powerless to bring to life. And Elijah prayed. And the bones began to revive and rattle. They began to come together bone to bone. As the old song says, the knee bone was connected to the thigh bone, the thigh bone to the hip bone, bone upon bone, and then flesh upon bone, until the bones in the valley were restored. And God commanded Elijah to pray that these restored beings be given the breath of life, that they might be made fully whole and breathing. And Elijah prayed, “Come O four winds, O breath. Breathe upon these lifeless ones that they may live.” And the breath came into them, and they lived and stood upon their feet, a huge, living, breathing crowd of people.

What a thrilling image this is. When I look at our world, at Afghanistan and the Middle East, at Ireland and Africa and Serbia. When I look at the tragedy in the Boston Archdiocese. When I look upon the poverty that remains in even this the richest land, and when I grasp that this land consumes far more resources than is healthy for our planet and our common life together. When I listen to the joys and concerns of this community and know that in the midst of our many blessings there are also deep, deep sorrows and fears and disappointments and worries and hurts. When I look at all of these things, it is so very clear that there is much we must do to be of help to one another.

But I am equally clear that all our help by itself will fail us miserably. Like Ezekiel, we need to pray over the dry bones of our existence. We need to say, “O dry bones hear the healing word of the Lord.” We need to pray that where there is death and destruction and unmoveable hostilities that the breath of God will come over the landscape and that the people may rise whole once again.

And if we pray diligently, will we get everything we want? Will we make all the dry bones rise and knit themselves together? My first instinct is to say probably not. But the evidence is mounting that if we pray diligently, we will indeed change the world in which we live. The Carmelite Sisters in New Orleans were onto something.

So, where we see that which is arid and lifeless and hostile, let us bring our energy and our compassion and our efforts. And let us also bring our prayers. Let us say, “O dry bones hear the word of the Lord. God will put breath in you, and you will live. God will put muscles and flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you will live.” Amen.

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