

March 26

Ezekiel 37:1-14

“Reading the Classics: Walking Among the Bones”

Our text today is one of the most vivid and arresting images we see in scripture. The first question I have when something jumps off the page like that is **“where did it come from?”** If we are to make friends with a *powerful image* having a meaningful “ick” factor, it needs to make sense rather than just being provocative.

Ezekiel has been caught up in this vision by God because the children of Israel have lost hope. They have lost hope because *they have lost everything*: Military conquest of their homeland, death of loved ones, slavery for survivors and being taken to a land not theirs in which to live had all happened long enough ago that any expectation of a quick recovery is gone.

***Serious loss required serious imagery.*** We don’t have to have experienced what the ancient Israelites did to struggle with hope and the challenges of living a human life. *No matter who we are there will be challenge, loss, grief and days which feel foreign to hope.*

So what do piles and piles of dry bones have to teach us about how we might move forward in days when ***complexity and loss feel as if they have made the world unrecognizable?*** Well, notice how God acquainted Ezekiel with the place of his vision. *“God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.”*

I have said I believe in denial. But what I really mean is we should never believe our *circumstance alone defines reality or sets our course of action.* Which means I have been less than precise – because that isn’t denial – that’s ***recognizing something bigger than circumstance*** is at the heart of life.

God made sure Ezekiel accurately understood the situation so he and the children of Israel would *be able to appreciate* what God was going to do. The situation is described as hopeless precisely so *we will understand the miracle when hope is renewed.* So, ***what are our options when we find ourselves in our own valley of the dry bones?***

First, like Ezekiel we can understand the nature of horrible circumstance and despair. Yet, we need to do better than the children of Israel. Let's not wander among the bones endlessly rehearsing our sorrow and loss. Ah, alas, poor Yorick! Ah, alas poor me. *Just look around - life is awful and then you die.* And on top of that, *"It'll probably rain."* Classically human responses to bad circumstance. With Dante' we can intone, *"Abandon hope all you who enter here."* These are probably not our best responses.

An alternative is to move to the other extreme and tell ourselves, ***"It's not that bad."*** Let's just pitch our tent, live among the bones, and pretend everything is fine. "You know, I kind of like bones." Except, there must have been something wrong with these bones – the sun isn't that hot! Cheer up! At least it isn't cold. This response is tricky because *sometimes it actually isn't far off the mark.* When we ***whine in the face of blessing,*** we really do need to lift our chin and get on with life. But in the valley of the dry bones it is a failed strategy to pretend everything is fine.

What if we take something from each of these two failed strategies and make a life-giving hybrid? What if we *walk through the valley of the dry bones – even the valley of the shadow of death - fully present in the moment* we are in – taking one step at a time – yet also ***traveling with the hope*** which comes from God's presence. ***The bones are real, and the future is in God's hands.*** "Let's live life while we have it." Let's not let it end early – or let circumstance lead us to give up when there is yet breath to receive from God. We might respond, *"But don't you understand, life really is over."* And the question echos back, "More 'over' than a valley of dry bones?" Really?

We will soon be to holy week and Christ will be crucified and the question will come with new urgency, ***"Can-these-bones-live?"*** By the end of holy week, we have seen the one in whom we have placed our hope mistreated, tortured and murdered. We will viscerally experience the question, ***"Can these bones live?"***

The answer is found not in our ability, but in God's faithfulness. In the dark days of our lives. In the dark moments of the life of Jesus. ***God knows*** what can and will be. And when we live by faith as God's children...it is more than enough.