

## Can These Bones Live?

Readings: 'Have You Prayed?' By Li-Young Lee  
'The Coming of Light' by Mark Strand  
'Ex Spe' by Peter A. Friedrichs

We know troubles and we know hope both await at every turn and yet we go on. We call ourselves a people of hope, we sang that aspirations again this morning. This is a powerful claim in this day and age. It is a powerful claim in any day or any age. As we try to be a people of hope, we need to know about other people of hope. There is a lineage of people of hope. People who see trouble and yet know they can go on. I collect stories of people of hope, within these walls and beyond them, across space and across time. I remember these stories when the despair and trouble threaten to overwhelm me. I try to remember them to feel less alone, to feel strength and conviction and determination to be among the People of Hope, those devoted to the creation of beloved community, those who act out of their loyalty to love and truth. Today I'll be sharing with you one of the People of Hope that I think of when hope is hard to find. His name is Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was a priest who lived in the land we now know as Israel in the sixth century before the common era. He was also a prophet, whose teachings, prophecies, and visions are recorded in the book of the Hebrew scriptures that bears his name. Ezekiel lived at a time marked by trouble, trauma, despair, and uncertainty. During his lifetime, the Jewish kingdom of Judah, in which Ezekiel lived, was dominated by the Babylonian Empire. In the year 597 before the common era, the Babylonians forced the king and other elite members of Judean society into exile far from home. Ezekiel was among those who had to leave everything familiar and start a new life in a new land. There was tremendous suffering. Then, eleven years after that first exile, the Babylonians destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem.

The exile and the destruction of that first temple were a turning point in the history of Judaism. Before then, much of the religious practice had happened in the temple, led by priests. The exile of most of the priests and the destruction of the temple meant that religious practice had to change. If what we now call Judaism was to survive it needed to change – and it did. These people of hope figured out how to go on in the midst of trouble. Religious practice changed to better suit the times. Practices that preserve identity in a hostile place, like Sabbath-keeping became more important.

In this world of pain, loss, and uncertainty, Ezekiel began to prophesy, to share his visions. His visions and prophetic acts are some of the strangest in the Hebrew scriptures. The glory of the lord appears and is four creatures with four faces each, wings, human hands, wheels within wheels, a dome and a throne all together. God instructs him to eat a scroll full of words of mourning and woe and so he does. Ezekiel lies on his side for more than a year. It is all very strange and the scholars have tried to make sense of it. The interpretations that I find most compelling are about trauma. The people are traumatized. Many have been forced into exile. All had their temple, their holiest place, destroyed. Nothing makes sense. Why would God let this happen? How do we practice our faith when the way we had been taught to be faithful no longer works? Trauma destroys clear narrative and clear memory for individuals and communities. Ezekiel's vision and actions reflect a community desperately trying to make sense of something that makes no sense. It reflects the tumult and uncertainty and strangeness and pain of exile. In his first prophecies, Ezekiel blames the people for their suffering, saying they were not faithful enough and their exile is punishment from God. This is described in brutal detail. Then, there is a shift and Ezekiel turns towards

hope. One of my very favorite passages in the Hebrew scriptures is in this hopeful section of the Book of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel reports that God takes him and places him in a valley that is filled with dry bones. God shows Ezekiel all of these dry bones and asks, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' Ezekiel demurs in his answer, 'Oh God, you know.' Then God says to Ezekiel, 'prophesy to these bones, say to them that God will cause breath to enter them and they will live. God will return sinew, flesh, and skin to them and cause breath to enter them and they will live.'

I need to pause here, right after God's instruction to Ezekiel for a note on translation. The word that is translated as 'breath' is '*ruach*' in Hebrew.

The word *ruach* is powerful. There is no English translation that captures the fullness of its meaning. *Ruach* means breath, but it also means spirit and wind. It is the natural and inanimate, the human and animal, and the supernatural all in one small word.

As I continue the story, I will use the words in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, which is one of the best scholarly translations, but I invite you, every time you hear wind or breath or spirit to hear the multiple translation possibilities available in '*ruach*.'

After being given instructions to prophesy to the bones, Ezekiel does. Then there was a great noise and the bones joined together, sinews, and flesh, and skin but there was not yet **breath** in them. Then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the **breath**, and he does. Ezekiel says, 'Come from the four **winds**, o **breath**, and breathe upon these dead bodies so they may live. Then the **breath** comes into them and they live.'

And, just in case anyone has missed the metaphorical meaning a valley of dry bones returning to life, God makes it plain. He tells Ezekiel to tell people that the bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.' God will bring people up from their graves and bring them back to the land of Israel. God says, 'I will put my **spirit** within you and I will place you on your own soil.'

Why do I think this is a story we should know? Why did I encourage Diane, our director of religious education, and our curriculum team to include this story in our religious education for youth, which they are doing today? I've spend a lot of time with this vision, approaching it with the tools of literary analysis, like the translation notes I mentioned earlier and in more mystical ways, which I will invite you into in a few minutes. Having this vision as a conversation partner, a subject of study and a focus for meditation enriches me, gives me hope, connects me to people across space and time. I offer up these possibilities to all of you.

One of the most compelling pieces of this scripture is *ruach*. The three possibilities of *ruach*, breath, wind and spirit, speak to me and I find myself translating that phrase differently to myself on different days. There are times I'm feeling more naturalist, more humanist, more theist. There are times when hope and restoration seems most likely to come from the cycles of nature, other people, a transcendent force that I sometimes call spirit or love or God. When we despair, when we are in our own personal valleys of dry bones, the forces that bring hope, the forces that bring life, the forces that reanimate us can be grand forces like wind, the soft delicate intimate force of breath – ours or others, or the mysterious ways that spirit can move in our lives. In our hopeless times, we don't know where the hope might come from, how the *ruach*, the wind, the breath, the spirit will live and grow in us.

I also love this small word and the story that it lives in because it doesn't require definition. It's a slippery word that resists my attempts settle it into one category. The story still works if you translate ruach as wind or breath or spirit. Most translators use a variety of meanings. "What gives you hope?" The people might have asked Ezekiel. "Is it nature? The cycles of the seasons and the truth that light comes and goes but never fully disappears?" "Is it people? Our capacity to make things better than they are?" Is it God? The mysterious way that the transcendent mystery moves and flows in this world?" In this vision, Ezekiel says "yes" to all three at once. Especially for Unitarian Universalists, a people of love, hope and change, united by shared principles and promises and not shared theology, we are served by living in the ambiguity that ruach offers. We see hope returning; we cultivate hope for one another; we understand it differently and yet it moves and animates us all.

This prophecy was for a specific time and a specific people, a people facing the pain of exile and uncertain if their community would hold together in a new land when the ways they had practiced their faith and bound their community together no longer work. Of course, the prophecy itself didn't come true. There was no valley of dry bones that all came back to life, but that isn't the point. This prophecy gave the people hope when hope was hard to find. It reminded them that their God had not forgotten them. It reminded them that restoration was possible.

This prophecy has endured for millennia because it speaks to so many. There is always despair and trouble and we are always longing for the assurance that we can go on. So many of us yearn for the same kind of enlivening that the prophet foretold. We want restoration. We want suffering to end. So many of our celebrations this season are about the return of the light and in this northern climate, that means life. We want that restoring breath or spirit or wind to wash over us.

Here is a modern reflection on this vision, from a man named Steven, as told in the book *Accidental Saints* by Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber:

'No website;

No relationship;

No Mac computer or iPhone;

No exercise, no diet, no supplement;

No job, office, or title on my business card;

No amount of Diet Coke, good scotch, or bad beer;

No self-help book, therapist, or self-improvement class;

No car, house, or any other status symbol I can think to buy;

No movie or video game, and no matter how truly awesome Doctor Who is.

They have all done nothing more than temporarily anesthetize the longing in my soul to be complete, to be whole, to be connected, to be okay, to love and be loved as I am now with too much weight, too much debt, too much depression, too much gray, too much geek, and not enough of everything else.

And I despair that my trip on this rock flying around the sun at sixty-seven thousand miles an hour is just some sort of sick cosmic joke.

But then I remember. I remember the Valley. The Valley of the Dry Bones.

God is talking to the prophet Ezekiel and guides him into something resembling a massive open grave.

It's a valley covered, from one end to the next, with nothing but humanity at its core—dry bones. In this valley there is absolutely no hope of life.

God tells Ezekiel to cry out, cry out to those dry bones, cry out to God's children. Tell them to rise, tell them to rise, tell them to listen to God and rise. They listen.

And God lifts them up, puts them back together, and breathes into them. And they breathe anew. And God fills them with the Spirit. And where there was once death, hopelessness, and despair, there is new life.

In hearing that, there is light. There is hope. And that is sufficient.<sup>1</sup>

May we all know light. May we all know hope. May that be sufficient.

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<sup>1</sup> *Accidental Saints* by Nadia Bolz-Weber, page 149