

First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC
4 Pentecost
July 2, 2006

Obedient Hope

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Mark 5: 21-24, 35-43

The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel is a wild ride, so wild that some medieval rabbis had a rule that no one under the age of 18 should even think about reading it. Which got me thinking that maybe this would be a good way to get our teenagers to read Scripture—tell them they aren't allowed to go anywhere near it! Anyway, check out Ezekiel (if you think you're mature enough to handle it, that is).

The passage we read this morning describes one of this 6th century BCE prophet's most fantastical visions. God puts him into a trance, then whisks him off to a vast valley where he gets to witness something truly sobering, a little like Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come.

The valley is full of bones. God takes him on a guided tour of the grisly place, from bone to bone, rubbing his nose in the charnel. It's as if God wants Ezekiel to certify that the bones in the valley are in fact 'very dry', as the text says, which is another way of saying 'very dead'.

Then, in his best James Earl Jones imitation, God asks The Big Question—"Mortal, can these bones live?" And Ezekiel replies, "O Lord God, you know."

What kind of an answer is that?

Is it an expression of triumphant conviction—"O Lord God, you *know* they *can*!"?

Or an expression of humble trust—"Lord, if you say so, they can!"?

Or is it a waffle? A non-answer? An evasion?

If it is an evasion, it's not surprising. It's easy to imagine that Ezekiel is so stunned and sickened by the sight of the bones that he can't answer God directly or honestly. In the face of such carnage, even a good and faithful prophet might find it impossible to say 'yes' to God. An affirmative would stick in his throat.

"Can these bones live?"

Maybe if the vision before him were less horrific, the prophet might have responded by rolling his eyes, dismissing God's question with a laugh, like the mourners in today's gospel laugh when Jesus says that the little girl is not really dead. Not dead? Only moments earlier, everyone in the house had seen her die. And dead is dead. Everyone knows that. And yet...by the time the story ends, she is up, walking and eating.

But Ezekiel's vision is too awful for laughing, or even for crying, much less for confident hoping. The mangled bones filling the valley like corpses bulldozed into open pits at Treblinka, or skulls lined up on the pews of village churches in Rwanda—those bleached carcasses are the symbolic remains of a people. The text says that they represent the "whole House of Israel." Here Ezekiel is confronted not so much with the fact of ordinary human mortality, but with the possibility of a fate far worse than death—the human future erased, no one left to remember.

It is a vision of genocide. And in the face of it, it's reasonable to think that the stricken prophet does not and cannot answer God's question. He manages only a vague evasive response, like something you might mumble to save face when you bump into someone whose name you should know but can't quite recall.

I once visited a huge World War II military cemetery in Hawaii. It is a very beautiful place—row on row of white crosses, punctuated by the occasional Star of David, covering neat slopes of green, well-kept grass, and it is so silent and tranquil there that when the

breeze comes up, the snapping of flags is the only sound you hear.

The cemetery is meant to elicit hushed pride in ultimate sacrifices made for a noble cause. It elicits great sorrow too, but sorrow mellowed by pride, grief mitigated by patriotism. And I felt all that, being as patriotic as the next person.

But pride and patriotism did not keep my gorge from rising or the thousands of crosses spread out before me as far as my eye could see from looking like bleached bones. I was in the valley. And if God had asked me at that moment whether those bones could live, whether there was some glorious purpose in it all, or whether there would ever come a time when we would not bury men and women in places like that one, or in other places with no markers, no flags, nothing pretty to mask the desolation and the waste, I would have been hard-pressed to say anything at all, let alone a firm and faith-filled 'yes'.

We Christians say that we are people of hope, but that does not mean that we are optimists. The truth is that hope is a difficult and painful virtue to practice, and just about the only time it is easy to be hopeful is when you are hoping in the abstract. It is a different matter when you are staring, trembling, at the very particular evidence of a mass slaughter.

But the Scriptures depict a God who demands hope and offers hope precisely in the midst of such repulsive particulars. And God desires that the divine promise of life will be spoken in and to the particulars. Therefore he instructs the prophet, "Prophecy to the bones!" In other words, tell them the truth. Tell the dead that *they can live*. Tell them that *they will*.

Ezekiel, who himself cannot be sure that the words he is about to utter are worth speaking, does as he is told and speaks them.

Now, preaching to the dead is a pretty tough pastoral assignment. Thankfully, I don't have to do it here. There's not a dry bone in the First Church valley! But preaching guru Fred Craddock knows a pastor who

had to do it every week in a small church that was becoming rapidly smaller because of the people's refusal to open up to the life-giving gospel. Those folks were so dead, Craddock reports, that in an act of sheer desperation one Sunday—I think it was the last Sunday before they fired him—the pastor had them all hold hands in a circle, close their eyes, listen to spooky music, and attempt to make contact with the living.

Craddock does not say whether it worked.

We know that Ezekiel's sermon worked. God's promise came true in the instant. You know how it went down—'the knee-bone connected to the thigh bone, the thigh bone connected to the hip bone; the hip bone", and so on. Sinews and flesh clothed the reconnected skeletons, and they looked like human beings again. And finally, when God's breathed God's own spirit back into those humanoids, they lived!

For the spirit of life to return to the people, it turns out that God did not need an unambiguous affirmation of faith from the prophet. Ezekiel did not need to be certain that bones can live. He needed only to do what God told him to do, to speak, to act, just as he was commanded. And in the end I think that's what hope is—a kind of loyalty—not necessarily a personal conviction that all will soon be well, but *an act of obedience* to the One who commands all life into being.

As many of you know, a good number of First Church women are members of the "Daughters of Abraham." The Daughters are Muslim, Jewish and Christian women who meet monthly to talk about books from each other's traditions and to become interfaith companions on the long road to mutual understanding and respect. Recently, some of the Daughters traveled to Jerusalem together on a multi-layered pilgrimage whose impact we are still sifting through and sorting out.

In Israel/Palestine, when we inquired about hope, we got many different takes on the question of whether the dry bones in that grief-stricken and violent valley can live.

Our middle-aged Palestinian Christian guide said that he still had hope. Our younger Palestinian Christian driver said that he did not.

Members of an interfaith women's group not unlike our own had hope. The existence of interfaith conversation on a grassroots level is a sign of hope all by itself in a city where no social structures exist for meeting The Other in the ordinary course of daily life. But those women also admitted that their conversation had eventually broken down, perhaps irreparably—they used the word 'volcanic' to describe what had happened—over political matters, or what we came to call 'conflicting narratives', different worldviews that could not be resolved even by people who were friends.

On one of our last evenings in the city we met Judy Blanc. She is an Israeli activist who for more than fifty years has been putting her mind, heart and body on the line for an end to the occupation and the forging of a just peace. Her talk made a huge impression on us. During the question time, I asked her what sources she draws on to enable her to keep showing up year after year, day after day, in such an intractable situation. She had earlier told us that she is not a religious Jew, and it was clear that she had not given the question much thought. But after a while, she said, "Well, I just wake up every morning *furious*."

Judy Blanc obeys her anger.

Ezekiel obeyed his God.

What or whom do you obey?

When you look at the world with all its injustices, perhaps like me you are not optimistic about our ability to think or work our way out of our mess.

You aren't sanguine about ever bridging the widening gap between rich and poor.

You don't know what to do about the escalating violence in Boston, let alone famine and genocide in Darfur, or the spread of AIDS in Africa.

You do not know what to do about the tensions on our borders concerning illegal immigration and the prospect of watching racist xenophobia increase wearing the mask of security concerns.

You don't know how to rein in a government that is normalizes brutality in the name of protecting your freedoms.

You do not see a clear path from the world as it is to the world you want your children and grandchildren to inherit.

You are stunned and sickened at the sight of so many dry bones, by the dawning awareness that a future is hanging in the balance, and that the remembrance of how to be human is fading from memory.

And in the midst pf all these particulars, God is always asking, "Mortal, do you think the bones can live?"

"O Lord God, you know."

An affirmation of confidence? An expression of trust?

Or a waffle? As in, "I have no idea"?

It doesn't matter whether you can answer a resounding 'yes'. It doesn't matter if you find it hard to trust, or are afraid or pessimistic. It doesn't matter if your gorge rises and 'yes' sticks in your throat. What matters is that you know that God has shown us the vision, and that God has something for us to do. It matters only that we find it in us to obey, that we do what we are told, that we step up and speak God's word of life to the dead bones loyally, perseveringly, despite our own revulsion, pessismism, and doubt.

That is why we are here in this sanctuary, I hope. That is what we are doing here week after week—by God's grace, cultivating loyal and willing hearts, getting ready to act as if the answer were in fact a resounding 'yes', despite of all evidence to the contrary. Learning to hope.

That is why we gather to read and ponder these fantastical stories year after year, generation after generation. And that is why we ignore the rabbis' good sense and let our children read them too.