

The Hungry Spirit...Hopeful

Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:17, 38-45

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The date was April 8, 1966. The announcement on the cover of *Time* magazine rocked the country. “God is dead,” it declared. Bill Hamilton was one of the theologians interviewed. He remembered a Sunday afternoon in 1938 when he was only 14 years old. He and his friends were building pipe bombs. One exploded. One of his friends, an Episcopalian, was lay dead. Another, a Catholic, was fatally wounded. And a third, the son of an atheist, emerged without a scratch.

That event did something to young Bill Hamilton. How, he wondered, could a just God allow something like this? They were just kids. A seed of doubt was planted in his mind that day. Maybe God is not what we say God is.

Bill Hamilton grew up to become a theologian, studying with Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great theologians of the day. He could not reconcile the image of God as all-knowing and all-powerful with the reality of human suffering, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. He wrote out what he believed are our two options: “God is not behind such radical evil, therefore he cannot be what we have traditionally meant by God” or “God is behind everything, including death camps—and therefore he is a killer.”

Hamilton and others used the idea of the death of God to challenge people to re-think God, to allow an old image to die so a new image could be born. The public never quite understood what they were trying to say. And as you can imagine, the response was hostile. Hamilton received death threats. There were letters to the editor. He lost his endowed chair at Colgate Divinity School. Colleagues would not speak to him.

Bill Hamilton is 83 years old now. His health is fragile. His hands shake and he moves slowly. But he is still a Christian and deeply committed to Jesus Christ. And he is still trying to understand how God relates to us. (*Baptists Today*, February 2008, p. 32)

It’s an important question, isn’t it? It’s as old as the pages of the Old and New Testaments. It’s as fresh as Auburn, Alabama, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where family and friends grieve the tragic murders of two female students.

Do we have reason to believe? Do we have reason to be hopeful?

These were Ezekiel's questions too as he looked out at a valley of dry bones. They were everywhere, "very dry" bones, the text says, suggesting that they had been there for a long time. It was a vision not just of death but of sun parched, rough hopelessness. It was a parable about the people of Israel who felt hopeless, whose Spirit has dried up within them.

Do you recall what had happened to the people of Israel? They lost their land. During the time of Ezekiel, the people of Israel were in forced exile. That wonderful land flowing with milk and honey had been snatched from them. It was the land that God promised to their forefathers and mothers. It's a great scene in Joshua 3 when people of Israel took possession of the Promised Land. The text says that the priests took the Ark of the Covenant onto their shoulders and began to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. It says that when the priests' feet touched the water of the Jordan River, the water leaped back. The flow of the river stopped, allowing the priests to step into the middle of the riverbed. The priests, holding the Ark of the Covenant, stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan River until all the people of Israel passed into the Promised Land. It was God's validation. God promised them this land. Now they possessed it. There was great celebration! It was a wonderful day for the people of Israel!

But when Ezekiel looked at the people of Israel many years later, he saw a much different scene. The celebration was long gone. The great day when they crossed the Jordan River was a faint memory. In Ezekiel's day, the people mourned because they had lost the Promised Land. They were forced from the land of promise, that land flowing with milk and honey, into a land of pessimism, riddled with very dry bones. They were despondent, depressed, in despair because they saw no way back to the Promised Land.

Now notice what happened to Ezekiel in the text. As he looked at the valley of dry bones, God asked Ezekiel a question that only God would know to ask: "Mortal, can these bones live?"

How would you answer such a question? "Is this a trick question, God? Dry bones live? I don't think so!"

Can very dry bones live? Ezekiel answered, "O Lord God, you know."

Because God did know. Because with God hope is always possible, even with very dry bones.

So God told Ezekiel to preach to the bones. Say to them, “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” And Ezekiel preached to the bones.

What happened next is another of the great scenes in the Old Testament. The text says that it began with a sudden noise, a rattling, and then the scattered bones began to shift and come together. I can’t help but think of the old song about the anklebone being connected to the leg bone. I thought about suggesting that as an anthem for today, but I was afraid the choir might scatter my bones somewhere! As Ezekiel watched, skeletons began to form. Then the skeletons were covered with tendons and muscles, like you might see in an old Gray’s *Anatomy* book. And then, these skeletons covered with tendons and muscles were enveloped by flesh. In the time span of one verse, the valley of dry bones was transformed into a valley of human beings, except for one thing. The text says that they had no *ruach*, no “breath or spirit.”

In the Hebrew language, the word *ruach* can be translated in three ways: as “wind” or “breath” or “spirit.” A translator determines which by its context. Notice what happens here. God commanded Ezekiel to preach again, this time to the *ruach*: “Come from the four winds, O *ruach*, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

Ezekiel preached, and the *ruach* came. The wind blew and breath came into their bodies. The Spirit animated the bodies, and they stood on their feet, a great multitude alive unto God. What an amazing sight it must have been!

Then God explained the meaning of this vision to Ezekiel. The dry bones represented the people of Israel. In exile their despondent hearts cried out,

Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.

This vision given to the prophet Ezekiel was a message of hopefulness from God to God’s people. Could very dry bones ever live again? God knew. Because with God hope is always possible, even when it seems impossible. So God said to the lifeless people of Israel,

'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.

It's a timeless parable, isn't it, a word we need desperately? We all have tasted the milk and the honey of the Promised Land. We have all have had the goodness and love and grace of God overflowing in our lives. We know what it is like to dance for joy, to have our hearts sing. And then we all know how it feels to lose it, to have it snatched away. It causes us to realize that part of what Bill Hamilton said is right. God is not standing beside us with an umbrella shielding us from all things bad. No, rain falls on the just and unjust. Jesus told us that. And when it rains hard, it can feel like your soul has become a valley of very dry bones. Despondent. Depressed. In despair. And that is a fearful thing. You may fear that you will never emerge, that you may never dance or sing again. Our hungry spirits can feel hopeless.

That is where Lent takes us this year. To a dark place. A scary place. And you might say that that is exactly how you feel. See a valley of very dry bones—parched by the hot sun, rough—and believe the unimaginable. These dry bones—your dry bones—can live again. By the power of God's hope, they will begin to rattle around, coming together, taking on signs new life. Just as the daffodils emerge from the cold ground of winter and remind us that warmth and life are coming, so the message of Lent reminds us of hope. It is not a hope that bad will never happen. It is hope that God will give us what we need when we need it.

Closing Prayer

As you did long ago, O Ruach of God, breathe on us now. Fill us with life anew that we may love what You love and do what You would do. Amen.