

# Oh LORD, You Know

March 26, 2023

## Valley of Dry Bones

Some of you know that I celebrated the funeral last year of a young trans woman who had died by suicide. All funerals are heart wrenching, but this one was particularly so. She wasn't a church member, but the funeral home reached out to me because they know of the compassion of this church. Without betraying the young woman's privacy, I can tell you that her story includes much of what you'd imagine, of deep struggle to find her place in a world and society that is hostile.

She has been my Patron Saint these last weeks and months, as the culture wars have heightened, and the Human Rights Campaign reports a record 340 anti-LGBT bills at the state level. It feels like all is lost, like the most basic decency of human society has shriveled up and died. Every time I hear anti-trans rhetoric, I talk about the woman I buried too young because "the world" thought they knew her better than she knew herself.

As I've been praying with our scripture passage from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, this passage in which God sets Ezekiel down in a valley of dry bones, I keep thinking of all of the carnage, the senseless death, that is all too prevalent amidst the LGBT community, of the piles of dead bodies that are piling up because of the way our society treats people who are simply trying to be their authentic selves.

My prayer about these dry bones has also brought to mind people in the midst of dry, lifeless marriages, folks who have struggled mightily, but whose relationship is utterly and irrevocably dead. Sometimes, our relationships become a pile of dry bones. And, of course, this image of a valley of dry bones resonates with all who are grieving. Whether the piles of dry bones we're encountering are societal or personal, metaphorical or actual, it's not too hard to be able to find a way to resonate with this scripture. The reason this image is so well known is because we get it.

## The Scripture

Before we dive in to how this text can inspire us, though, it's helpful to have a little context. The Ezekiel was prophesying in the 6th century B.C.E. amidst the Babylonian Exile. This is critical to understand this text.

For those of you who don't remember what the Babylonian Exile was, in short, the Israelites had been prospering in the land on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean since Moses had led them out of Egypt. Central to their faith and identity was worshiping in the temple in Jerusalem and the covenant that God made with Abraham that his descendants would always have the land. The Exile is the period in their history when the Babylonians waged war in Jerusalem for two years, devastated the city, including the temple, and then carried many of those who survived, including the king, into captivity in Babylon.

The Jewish people are devastated. Not only have they experienced the carnage of war, and are now refugees, the destruction of the temple and the fact that they no longer possess the land call into question the fundamentals of their faith. Their tradition had demanded worship and sacrifice

at the temple in Jerusalem. God had promised Abraham that his descendants would always have the land. If these two cornerstones were shattered, what was left?

This context is important because Ezekiel, therefore, is prophesying to us, too, when our cornerstones are shattered, when the foundations of our worldview don't hold anymore. Whether you always thought we'd have American Democracy in the shape it was as you were growing up, or you never imagined life without your partner, Ezekiel's valley of dry bones is all too familiar of an experience.

A couple of interesting points: God is with Ezekiel in the valley of death, and God is with us in our valleys, too. Second, and I think this is a hugely important lesson for us all, when God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel's response is, "Oh LORD, you know." The humility there is sooooo important. Ezekiel doesn't say yes or no, doesn't imagine to have the answers. Everything he knows about the world and life and death and the way things work says that dry bones cannot live.

What I love in this interaction is that Ezekiel doesn't try to figure it out, doesn't rely on his wisdom or intellect. Rather, he volleys it back to God. Oh God, you know. What if one of the lessons of this passage is that when we are deep amidst the valley of dry bones, when death and pain and grief are surrounding us, instead of fretting and spinning about a resolution to our situation, we volley it back to God. Oh LORD, you know.

So often, we try to control outcomes, we try to make things happen. Even in our grief, even amidst death, our culture tells us not to wallow too long and to make it somehow psycho-spiritually productive, making ourselves better and stronger, somehow, by our experience of loss. One of the lessons of this passage in the valley of dry bones is to remember that God is with us amidst the devastation and to let God do the heavy lifting. Oh God, you know.

The other lesson I lift up for us today is the power of breath. It is no mistake that the animating force the whole way through this passage is the breath of God. Flesh and blood aren't enough to give the old dry bones life. It is only the breath of God that gives life.

Six times in this passage we hear the word "ruah," breath of God. That is what the centering prayer that I introduced as part of our children's time is all about. When we breathe in, "Holy Spirit, bring us peace," we're resetting with God. We're reminding ourselves that the divine breath is what animates us and has the power to restore, heal, and motivate.

## **Conclusion**

Whether you're walking through the valley of dry bones, or simply exhausted due to the circumstances of life, this reminder that God is present to us in our breath is a powerful reminder to pause and recharge. Recently, I came across this poem which, while delightfully silly, I also found particularly profound. It's called, "An Error Message Just For You," by Lyndsay Rush:

You are not a Roomba  
or Rosey from the Jetsons  
or Pacman or Inspector Gadget or  
a Tesla with a vanity plate  
(they all have vanity plates)

You're more Florence than Machine  
More holy mother than motherboard  
Here for much more than to be user friendly

So take this as a reminder  
flashing on the screen in yellows and reds -  
to power down  
and let your systems process  
Because even an optimus in her prime such as you  
Is not designed to constantly operate  
at full capacity

The last thing I'll lift up is that, while relying on God and pausing to breathe are spiritual lessons in this text, they don't bring the dead back to life. We're a few weeks before Easter yet, so I'm not going to go deep into the message that I preach a variation on every year, the message that resurrection life always looks very different from the life we had known and are grieving.

I started out my reflections today calling to mind the funeral I celebrated for a young trans woman. No amount of praying or breathing will ever bring her back. The Israelites did eventually return to Jerusalem and the surrounding region. But their faith and how they understood the world was forever changed.

And there's a wisdom and a grace in that. The poem says, "to power down and let your systems process." The scriptures say, "Oh LORD, you know," and instruct us to breathe. Our centering prayer says, "Holy Spirit, bring us peace." My prayer this week is that, however you access it, the breath of God will sustain you and give you life.

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