

Son of Man
Ezekiel 37: 1-14

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I was watching Rachel's teacher one morning. I noticed that she had some interesting ways of calling the first graders to stop and listen. She sang out "Everybody listen" and the children responded "right now." Or, she said, *give me 5* and the children were to lift one hand from their work. *Give me 5 more* and the children were to take their other hand from their work. *That makes 10* and the children clapped. Even so, even this well seasoned teacher was not always successful at getting the children's attention. Oh, they might clap, they might respond, but some took the first opportunity they saw to get back to what they wanted to do. They missed what she had to say. When they finished what they were attending to, they sat looking lost because they didn't know how to do the next task. Or they found something else to do usually to the irritation of other students and the teacher.

It is difficult to get and keep the attention of many people, especially if they have work on their mind that needs to be done. Having been a high school math teacher before I went to seminary, I remember many a teacher training where teachers sat grading papers while supposedly listening to the speaker. They were busily trying to carve out some space in the weekend for themselves and their families and friends. Having been at this church a while now, I know very well that it is not only teachers who multitask. Thanks to technological wonders like Blackberries and Pocket PCs, we are assisted in our efforts to get it all done. You know as well as I do that our constant battle is to not attend to so much that we find ourselves inattentive to what matters most. So we haven't left our childhood completely behind. We mature adults don't always listen too well. We have times when we find ourselves a bit lost, and even times, let's be honest, when we irritate our families, coworkers, and friends...not to mention God.

The book of Ezekiel is one in which we see God again and again trying to get his people's attention. There's only one thing God wants. Get rid of the idols and listen to him.

The book is extraordinary. It is the only book in our Bible to begin with a description of God which, in a quick summary, shows God to be a flaming four faced creature with wheels. This striking depiction of God is followed by God's call of Ezekiel to be his prophet. The call is sealed when God makes Ezekiel eat the scroll filled with words of lamentation and mourning and woe (2:10 – 3: 3). Then, Ezekiel doesn't just get to go around and speak like Isaiah, instead he is made to physically act out the message God means him to give.

Just a reminder: the major prophets, those who have books named after them, lived during the years when Israel or Judah were about to be conquered by invaders or had already been conquered. Ezekiel is called to be God's prophet in 597 B.C. This is the time after the Northern Kingdom of Samaria (often referred to as Israel) had been conquered. It is shortly before Judah (in which Jerusalem was the center of their religious life) is conquered by Babylon. When Jerusalem is lost, Ezekiel continues to be God's prophet to those who have been exiled into Babylon.

In the first prophetic object lesson, a lesson given before Jerusalem falls, Ezekiel is made to build a replica of a city under siege on a brick, lie down on his left side, put the brick on top of him and lay in the center of the city for 390 days, the number of years Israel faced God's punishment. For Judah, Ezekiel is allowed to turn over, and on his right side he lay for 40 days, signifying the 40 years that they are exiled from their land, God's punishment. All of this is found in chapter 4. Chapter 5 has Ezekiel cutting off his hair and burning 1/3rd of it, running around the city using his sword to cut another 1/3rd of hair into pieces, and scattering the last third to the wind...signifying what would soon happen to the occupants of Jerusalem.

Those of you who listen carefully heard what is clearly intended in Ezekiel's prophecy—the years of deportation, the loss of their land, the defeat of their people and the lives lost were seen as all being part of God's punishment of his own people. The idea of God taking up the sword against his own people makes us uncomfortable. Yet this is one of the most powerful insights we get from the prophets.

Understand it is these Jewish exiles who will later put together the book of Ezekiel from their memories. It is their world which informs the Judaism of Jesus' day.

It is a world marked by a deep awareness of the human propensity toward idols and toward desiring things that are not of God. This is well described in the themes of the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible. What is different is that, rather than sending us out of paradise, out of the garden, the Lord himself will fight against our idolatry, against us, until we again pay attention to him.

In Ezekiel God says, "Behold I, even I, will bring a sword upon you, and I will destroy your high places..."

You can see that Ezekiel does more than equate loss in war with a nation's loss of connection with God. God doesn't just remove the protective hedge as depicted in Isaiah, rather God fights against us that God might claim what's left of us as his own.

How loud does God need to clap to get us to stop long enough to listen?

We, the authors of sin, make it hard for God to get and keep our attention. Yet God chooses to fight for us. God chooses to fight us for us.

So God transports Ezekiel into the valley of dry bones. We can be sure that this, like all else in Ezekiel, is meant to be vivid enough to hold our gaze, and to work in our imagination. It is an act with symbolic meaning.

“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were very many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry.”

The NIB notes that scholars have tried to find a historical reference for this valley of dry bones, a place where an army had indeed fallen, the dead scattered. They argue this, indeed, looks like a battlefield. While there is no conclusive finding, the image of a battlefield, it is agreed, is intended. These are the people...

Well, perhaps they are us at one time or another, perhaps they are us right now, who, by our attention to lesser things, battle against God.

We in the church have to be so very careful. One of my favorite cautions was given me by Reverend Neally Towe, a passionate woman of God, and one of the ministers of the Connecticut church which helped shape Chip and Trish. Over a lunch she shared with me that before she met with someone she would pray fervently that she wouldn't get in the way of God. She meant it. It isn't always clear...I know well that prayer.

We have to be careful. Some churches have been turned into trendy restaurants. Others are abandoned shells, the occupants of the adjacent graves their only remaining faithful. Some are being sold to pay for the wrongs of those who misused their call into the ministry.

We have to be careful. People come because they are finally ready to hear the Word of the Lord. If we replace it with something less, we leave them dry.

So the Lord himself comes to show us around the valley scattered with dry bones. Make no mistake, the Lord's presence is both a threat and a promise.

The threat--in the dry bones there is no sign of life. They've been there for a long time. For those who lived 2600 years ago who thought exile was bad, the message was that life can be even drier. You can choose a way which makes you so dry, so lacking of the life of God, that you become less than a corpse. Continue on your path, you exiles, and soon all human form will be lost.

About a month ago I was told of a documentary which looked at what would happen to the earth if humanity disappeared tomorrow. To a person, those who spoke of it were amazed at how quickly all signs of human life disappeared. Our tallest buildings became dust in the blink of an eye when viewed against geological time. The speed in which the earth recovered from our presence led those in the Thursday Night Bible study to ask “If humans didn’t exist, would there be sin?” After thinking about it a short time, the group’s answer was “no.” It isn’t much further down the path of reason to think that perhaps the world would be better without us, we who are the authors of sin.

Notice there is no devil in Ezekiel, no evil spirit who is the counter force to God. There is only our inattention, our separateness, our desire, our mislaid hope. We are the counter force to God’s will. One can only wish for a devil.

When Ezekiel sees the valley of dry bones, the Lord asks “Son of man, can these bones live?” Struck by the wasted remains of human existence, the remnants of the depths of sin, Ezekiel responds...”O Lord God, you know.”

Hear the question in Ezekiel’s response. He doesn’t simply say “I don’t know.” He begs God for an answer. Can we, who have too often gone after idols, be anything more to you, O Lord, than a valley of dry bones?

Son of man, “Prophesy to the bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.”

God continues with what Ezekiel is to prophesize: “Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

Karl Barth argued that God’s “yes” to loving us is always more powerful, and will be victorious over, a mortal’s “no,” a mortal’s love of lesser things. Indeed, in Ezekiel, God’s yes reaches beyond any hope of the Israelites who have cried out ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are clean cut off;’

For Israel, this Exodus, this journey to freedom, begins in the grave.

“Son of man, prophesy, say ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord. I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.... ‘“

You shall live. God’s “yes.”

I know those of you working through the Gospels in the Bible Study classes recognize “Son of man” as the phrase Jesus uses to refer to himself.

From Mark 10: 32 ff

And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; and they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, saying, ‘Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem; and the Son of man will be delivered to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, and deliver him to the Gentiles; and they will mock him, and spit upon him, and scourge him, and kill him; and after three days he will rise.

The Christian journey to freedom also begins in the grave.

Son of man, Jesus, he is the one who will speak what God wants the people to hear.

Son of man, Jesus, is the one who will do what God asks, whatever it is needed that the people might pay attention.

Son of man, Jesus, is the one who we are to listen to that we might live.

In the movie Apollo 13, the disappointed astronauts look out a window at the moon, seeing close up the place they had so thoroughly rehearsed to land. You can hear in their voices their yearning. They want so badly to have the experience; to pick up a rock, to put their footprints into the barren soil. Despite their knowing that due to the failure in their spaceship it is a journey they could no longer survive, you can see them wanting to turn the controls. But then the leader snaps out of his misguided dream and says...”priorities gentlemen. What is it you want? I want to go home.”

Notice, my friends, the yearnings which keep you from your true home.

Attend instead to the one whose love is real, to the one whose gift to you is life.

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