

New Life

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

Laura MacKinnon

One Sunday after church, Glenn and I headed over to Barnes and Noble, one of my favorite places to spend time. I just love being around all those books! No Kindle for me thank you! As I made my way through the store, I suddenly found myself standing in front of an entire end-cap display of books on atheism ... The God Delusion, God is not Great, The Atheist's Bible, God: The Failed Hypothesis, etc, etc. And I felt despair... My first thought was that I sure picked a bad time to graduate from seminary. And that Barnes and Noble experience worked on me for a while.

When Heather asked me to fill in for her this morning, I starting praying about what I should preach, and this was the passage that kept coming up. I didn't understand why at the time. Others might have been simpler and its been a year and a half since I've preached. Yet there it was. I made the commitment and began the adventure, if reluctantly. You see, the prophets aren't an easy read, and Ezekiel, well for those of you who have ventured into the book, you probably found yourself greeted by some of the most disturbing, graphic and judgmental prose in all the bible. And that's not the only problem. It's all of those incomprehensible visions and his strange behaviors. Hard to connect with or make sense of those. Our passage, The Valley of the Dry Bones is one of these visions. It's not hard to understand where atheists are coming from. If we just look at biblical texts from a two-dimensional perspective, they can seem pretty bizarre. The passage of the Valley of the Dry bones seems more like a preview of a Michael Bay/Jerry Bruckheimer summer blockbuster like Pirates of the Caribbean 15 or The Mummy keeps on returning!

But as I spent time in this passage and in the book of Ezekiel, I realized that that analogy wouldn't be too far off, because that's just what this passage is about. Ezekiel was providing the exiles in Babylon with a preview of coming attractions. And that coming attraction was the New Life that God had in store for them. And it worked, or we wouldn't all be sitting here today.

But before we begin, a little historical background to help us flesh out the bones of this passage.... The only record we have of this particular period, the transition from Jerusalem to Babylon is the book of Ezekiel and some information in Jeremiah. In 722 BC the Northern Kingdom of Israel had fallen. And the prophets made

sure that both the Northern and Southern Kingdoms had plenty of warning about why. The same kind of political, economic and religious issues we're struggling with today. The southern kingdom of Judah had the benefit of witnessing the fall of the Northern Kingdom and you would have thought that it would have served a cautionary tale about what could happen to them if they didn't change their ways, but they didn't. But then, we wouldn't know anything about not changing our ways.

In 597 BC King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took control of Jerusalem and installed King Jehoiachin's uncle Zedekiah as a puppet leader and deported young Jehoiachin, the priests, the artisans, anyone of value or influence to Babylon. When Zedekiah, decided to rebel against Babylon in 587, Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and it fell and the rest of the influential people were deported to Babylon. In all there were three deportations and it is estimated that around 20,000 were eventually exiled to Babylon. After the fall of Jerusalem in 587 there were more Israelites living outside of Jerusalem than in it and the only people left there were pretty much the rabble. There it is, the fall of the Southern Kingdom in a nutshell. Needless to say, these were people who didn't learn from the prophets or their mistakes and kept on thinking they were above the consequences of their choices.

It must have been a very bitter pill to lose everything they had and walk the 700 miles to Babylon. This was a journey toward humility. It is ironic, is it not, that the exiles, descendants of Abram of Ur return to the land of the father of their faith, back to their beginnings, to start anew. The exiles were settled at Tel Abib about 50 miles southeast of Babylon along the river Chebar, which would have been one of the irrigation canals.

Imagine these people who thought they were so entitled and superior coming through Babylon, the incredible walled city with its engineering feats of canals irrigating the desert plane. The River Chebar would have been one of these canals. This was the land of the Ziggurat temples which reached the sky, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, The 7th wonder of the world.

They would have arrived dirty, exhausted with broken spirits. They would have had to confront their insignificance in such a place as Babylon. It could be compared with someone from a small Midwestern town arriving in Vegas! For these defeated ones it would have

seemed as if the Babylonian God Marduk was more powerful than Yahweh! How easy it would have been for these exiles to have shifted allegiance from Yahweh to Marduk and be assimilated into Babylonian Culture. And many were. For those who remained faithful it would have seemed as if all hope was gone. They had lost their context and their identity because their identity and their faith were tied up in THE PROMISED LAND. Yahweh resided in the temple in Jerusalem, he was not here in Babylon. The Hebrew faith should have died out at this juncture. It is amazing that it did not. And in large part, that was because of Ezekiel.

Who was Ezekiel? He was a younger contemporary of Jeremiah. We know that he was a priest, the son of Buzi. If the reference of “the thirtieth year” applies to Ezekiel’s age, he would have been born around the time of good king Josiah’s reform movement, when the “book of the Law” was found.

He probably grew up in Jerusalem and trained at the temple school. During his first thirteen years he may have been caught up the religious and patriotic enthusiasm of the temple community that accompanies such a reform movement and perhaps his experience fueled his love and loyalty for the worship of Yahweh.

Ezekiel would have also witnessed the aftermath of the death of Josiah which we learn from Jeremiah was a time when the forms of worship were maintained, but were deprived of their deeper moral and spiritual content. It is likely that Ezekiel was a member of a minority, who like Jeremiah, sought to preserve their faith and saw the disastrous consequences of what had become a meaningless, empty and shallow faith.

As a priest, he would have been a part of the first deportation in 597. We do not know much about his first years there, but about five years into it he had his vision of God where he received his call (this is the chariot vision, the wheels within wheels). In this vision he realizes that Yahweh is not confined to the temple in Jerusalem, Yahweh’s presence was here in Babylon with his people. The import of this revelation cannot be overestimated. It changed the nature of their faith.

Part of Ezekiel’s call also resulted in his designation as a prophet. He eats the scroll and the presence of Yahweh becomes internalized in such a manner that his words become the word of Yahweh. Ezekiel was not just an observer, but participant. He had taken up the heavy responsibility for defining for the exiles the way of death and the way of life. And although Ezekiel had given up on the abilities of human beings, he had not given up on God.

It is in his early ministry that his messages of

God’s judgment upon Jerusalem are so lurid and graphic. Or at least they might seem that way to us. But remember, Christianity and its civility of neighborly love had not yet arrived. These were graphic and lurid times. How would Ezekiel possibly break through the denial and false hope of the exiles amidst the competition of everything Babylonian. The exiles were just biding their time awaiting their return to Jerusalem. Ezekiel’s preaching prior to the fall of Jerusalem was chastising and brutally judgmental, it also would have contained imagery from the Babylonian culture and his experiences there.

But in 587, after the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekiel’s preaching changed. Ezekiel knew that the future of Israel’s faith lay not with those remaining in Jerusalem but with the exiles in Babylon. He had to convince them that Yahweh was not confined to the land of Judah or the temple. He now had another mission. To communicate the dream of Yahweh’s new life that was waiting for them.

Which is where our scripture passage comes in.

Knowing what we do now, perhaps this vision will not seem so strange to us. And we may discover a resonance with our own experience. As Eugene Peterson explains, “When we see the struggles of our own short stories within the context of a larger, grander story, it gives those struggles not only dimension, but dignity. I think this is the purpose of this passage. The imagery of this vision, of dried up bones perishing in verse eleven, may have been shaped by common Old Testament language as seen in the psalms, Isaiah, lamentations. The LORD brings Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones, symbolic of the exiles on the plains of Babylon. Exile felt like a grave to them. The Lord leads Ezekiel all around these bones to take a good long look. And the Lord asks him “Can these bones can live?” And Ezekiel demonstrates humility when he says “Only You know.”

But where Ezekiel sees dead bones, God sees new life. God gives him the command to prophesy to these bones to hear the word of the LORD and offers up front, his promise of reversing the dying process and offering new life so they will know that he is the LORD. God’s intension was to bring New Life to his people, who were already spiritually dead before they ever came to Babylon.

Ezekiel obediently does as he is commanded. It is clear here that God is guiding his prophecies. And then he begins to see what God has promised because he is now seeing from God’s perspective. As he describes “the bones drew near, bone to its bone...the bones are the dispersed people coming together as a community. And as they did, the result was that sinews and flesh came upon them and they now had substance. But there was

still no breath in them (the Hebrew word for breath is *ruach*, which means wind, breath spirit and it is used 10 times in this passage). Remember the double creation of man in Genesis 2:7. As Ezekiel prophesies to the spirit to come from the four corners of the earth the breath entered them and they lived. They stood on their feet a very great army, the whole house of Israel not just the southern Kingdom of Judah. In verse eleven "They say our bones are dried up and our hope is perished; we are cut off from ourselves." Ezekiel's vision does not correct, he articulates their anguish and acknowledges that they are right. The promised land was their identity.

Ezekiel is commanded by the LORD to "prophesy what I say. I will open your graves and bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord when I have opened your graves, and have brought you up out of them. And I shall put my spirit within you and you shall live. And when it has happened, you will know that I, the lord have spoken and have done it.

If we want to know that it happened and that it was the LORD who had spoken and done it, perhaps all we need to do is take a look around and realize Ezekiel's legacy in the person sitting next to us here in this place.

What the exiles saw as death was the birth of the future of God's people. It was in Babylon that scribes and rabbinical literature like the Mishna and the Talmud originated. Without the synagogues that formed during this time, there would be no churches. It was during the exile that the teachings of scripture and oral traditions were compiled and written down. There was a unification of the Jewish people. The Israelites gained a new identity and became Jews in Babylon. The sophistication and advances of the Babylonian empire took Judaism to a place it would never have reached in Jerusalem.

It was Ezekiel who was the watchman, and guarded the exiles and the faith through this intense transition period. From Ezekiel we see the use of parables, the imagery of the good shepherd, the useless vine, the prophet internalizing the word of God and the embodiment of the servant who suffers alongside of his people. We see the seeds of individual responsibility and corporate guilt and the grace of forgiveness preceding repentance. We experience a new freedom before God.

According to Liberation Theologian Anthony Ceresko: "Ezekiel's work of bringing individuals to repentance and conversion through his preaching, instruction and example will begin to build the new community by preparing its individual members to take part in that rebuilding. Leaving behind the pride and pretensions associated with a political state, this community will

find a new identity as a people. They will draw on their older traditions with their roots in the village and family structures of a community of equals. This community will center on the family; pledging mutual support and protection, and humble loyalty to the demands of their covenant with their unique sovereign, Yahweh."

In the movie the Astronaut Farmer there is a scene where this farmer who so longs to be an astronaut is sitting at the table with his father in law. He has already failed miserably in his first attempt at building a rocket ship that would take him into space. He has become the laughing stock around the country, and his family is almost bankrupt from his obsession. After his first failure he had become despondent and his family was not doing well. He decided to risk it all and try again. When his father in law asked him why, the farmer said "Without the rocket all we are is a dysfunctional family." And his father in law told the farmer that he'd done just about the most important thing a man could do, he got his family to dream together!

Without the rocket of the Holy Spirit, the church is just another dysfunctional family. We're just dysfunctional people, living in a dysfunctional world. Ezekiel understood this and he got his faith family to dream of a new life together!

We are born into a certain set of circumstances, our gender, our families, our locale, our economics, our family patterns. But at some juncture, perhaps once or many times, we lose everything familiar and we feel cut off, we lose our context and our identity. And we are forced to redefine ourselves without those things. So when those times occur when you feel as though your bones are dried up and you are trapped in the valley of dry bones. It is good to remember Ezekiel and his vision and pray to God that we might take another look at our lives from his perspective. Perhaps what appears to be death is really new life and all we need to do is turn to the Holy Spirit for his animating breath.

Let us pray. Dear heavenly father, Help us to see the broken and dead places in our lives from your perspective, through your eyes of grace and compassion. Bring us, even if kicking and screaming into the new life you have waiting, we ask this in the name of your son Jesus who taught us to pray, our father....