

One of the most powerful visual images remembered from television and newspapers during the war-time effort called “Desert Storm” of 1991 was the sight of middle-eastern desert on fire. Do you remember the sight of plumes of acrid, black smoke streaming heavenwards—the sun hidden for weeks as hundreds of oil wells burned out of control? These wells had been blown up by retreating Iraqi soldiers following their invasion of defenseless Kuwait.

This vision of plumes of smoke haunts the human imagination, similar to the horrors of emaciated survivors and the strewn-about corpses of thousands found in Nazi concentration camps as the Allies liberated these death camps at the end of the Second World War. The dreams and souls of generations laid waste by the sin of humankind; the natural resources and beauty of the earth desecrated and abandoned by armies mad with revenge—such visions of death and destruction is a challenge for the human heart and mind to absorb. Confronted by the human heart wracked by self-righteous arrogance, racial hubris and greed, faith and hope are torn away.

The experience of Coalition forces crossing miles of acrid smoke past hulks of burning towers might have been that of Allied liberators as they encountered death camps beyond imagination, which was the very vision of prophet Ezekiel in our first scripture lesson when he comes upon the valley of the dry bones. As far as he could see, Ezekiel’s heart and soul is struck numb by the sight of the desiccated skeletons of the people of ancient Israel strewn about over the valley floor, a wasteland of once-teeming life seemingly forsaken by the God of life and love. Images of burning wells, emaciated bodies and of rotting bones reminds us of humankind gone wrong.

As vivid as is this wasteland of dry bones—a once great nation stilled—the question with which we must contend is God’s question to Ezekiel in this moment: *Can these bones live?* Is there any power that can contend with the ruthlessness of the human heart, being able to transform illnesses that so afflict the heart with redemption of new life?

A word of background—Ezekiel is one of a long line of prophets called by God to speak words of hope and encouragement to the Hebrews, the people of the Covenant. The time is 600 years before the birth of Christ. The place is Jerusalem, the southern Kingdom of Judah. The days are edgy and turbulent, for the people of God have forsaken God, have fallen away from deep connective relationship that has sustained them since their beginnings as slaves in Egypt. God has led them through harsh years in the wilderness to the Promised Land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Like others before them and others who have come after them (especially in times of prosperity) the Israelites become full, not with God and faith, but with pride, self-righteous arrogance, and greed. Now that they are doing well they assume they can thrive without God. And God warns them—give up your arrogance and your wayward ways and turn back to the source of your lives. If you do not, you will learn how hard it is to live without the loving-kindness of God.

The Hebrews do not heed these warnings. The northern Kingdom of Israel is overrun, carried off into slavery in Babylon. And then the southern Kingdom of Judah falls, the best and brightest taken to Babylon for in 596 B.C. the golden city of Jerusalem is crushed and utterly destroyed. Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of bones is a vision of history of the Hebrews; past, present and future. *Can these bones live?*

Do you remember the song learned long ago in childhood?

*The toe bone connected to the foot bone,
The foot bone connected to the ankle bone,
The ankle bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the thigh bone.....*

Less easy to recall are the songs opening words:

*God called Ezekiel one morning,
"Go down and prophesy."
Ezekiel taught the Zion the powers of God,
And the bones begin to rise.
We're going to walk around with-a dry bones.
Why don't you rise and hear the word of the Lord?*

The words come from an old African/American spiritual. There is little wonder why it emerged out of the African/American experience, a people trapped in that darkest time of American history when white people stole the lives, souls, and dreams of

captive Africans. We might understand why those who had been taken in slavery to North America found in these stirring words of Ezekiel great cause for hope – easy to understand how imagery of bones coming to life was transformed into a song that could help them walk as human beings in the cotton fields of oppression. They understood, like no others on this continent, the experience of Ezekiel's people.

The Israelites, removed from their native land into exile, far from their beloved home and accustomed ways, compelled to toil in the service of a conquering nation remained alive, but dead in hope and dead in faith. A people without hope is a nation of dry bones, crying out in misery as all enslaved people do. God carries Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones – bones symbolic of the lifeless dreams and hopes of a subjugated people. And as the prophet watches in astonishment, the bones come to life, covered with muscle, sinew and skin. They come alive by the grace and mercy of God.

Ezekiel prophesies as God instructs him. He tells the people of Israel enslaved in exile in Babylon, this vision is God's way of telling us that our lives—all but dead from and distress and despair—will be born again and the breath of God will breathe new life in the lives of his people. There is little wonder why American slaves embraced this story from the Hebrew Scriptures as their own. Despite their misery, humiliation and cruel injustice, the slaves gained hope as did the ancient Hebrews. Despite that they were enslaved; despite that in spirit, emotion and self-esteem they were mere skeletons of the powerful men and women they had been in Africa; despite how often they thought they were doomed; despite how they felt that they were as good as dead, the story of the live bones gave them faith to sing with joy, and happiness, and trust – to sing the truth that they would indeed rise like the dry bones of Ezekiel's forsaken valley.

What is our learning today when human slavery is considered unthinkable yet still reigns in the world? And for every one of us, where do we sense the world and our lives as if we too were slaves; slaves to the twisted human heart, slaves to the ways of the world? From where shall hope come? Where can faith be found when we are bound by our fears, prejudices and indifference?

At some time in her remarkable life, the Episcopal lay novelist and poet, Madeleine L'Engle once drafted a poem called, *Lines Scribbled on an Envelope*. In the manner of all poetry, it invites the reader or hearer into an “alternative reality”—time out of time—when in a flash all is changed, a new vision is claimed, and the world is turned inside out. That moment, even as brief as it sometimes is, makes all the difference. Here is what she says:

To learn to love
Is to be stripped of all love
Until you are wholly without love
Because
Until you have gone
Naked and afraid
Into this cold dark place
Where all love is taken from you
You will not know
That you are wholly within love.

Madeleine speaks of a “cold dark place” where seemingly all love is taken from us. It is in the midst of this deep well of despair; to some—the fortunate and the blessed—comes an awareness that even in the midst of this desperate place, we are sustained by the never-ending love and mercy of God. No person, no situation, no place can ever be *Godforsaken*. It is the very nature of God to be present, even and especially when we are in our darkest despair. Even when we are subjugated by the powers of evil alive in the world and we are “enslaved in sin” by selfishness, neglect of those in need, greed and prejudice, God is there.

Even with a vision as desolate as Ezekiel's valley of dry bones—skeletons who have lost our religious muscle and the skin of our faith—God is present. Here is our hope. What to us feels like a barren and Godforsaken future still brims with the radiance and power of God. What to us appears lost, in God, is found. And so new life will bind our withered old bones with new flesh and muscle and our dreams will come alive. Thanks be to God.