

“Can These Bones Live?”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Ezekiel paints a foreboding picture of someone walking through a valley of old, dry bones. We can picture this valley. The bones are bleached white by the sun. They are scattered here and there: femurs and ribs and tibia and such. It's quite a scene, probably rated PG-13. Notice, it is not the one walking through the valley who speaks. It is God who speaks. God has a pointed question: **can these bones live?**

God is asking this valley walker if he or she can imagine new life? Resurrection? A new day? Can you imagine it? And the one walking through the valley of bones is stunned by this question; silenced by this question. She's never considered this as a possibility! Indeed, she has not imagined these bones coming back to life! She can only imagine them eroding further. So, God's work in this passage is to stimulate the valley walker's imagination. Unless we can imagine a new day, that new day may never come. Unless we can imagine a day of peace, that day may never come. Unless we can imagine a day of sobriety, that day may never come. Unless we can imagine a day of justice for all, that day may never come.

So, in a way, we find God pleading with the valley walker to use her imagination. Imagination is one of God's best gifts to humanity. Let's use that gift! God says to the valley walker, “Speak to the bones. Preach to the bones. Talk it up. Help them imagine a new day!”

I think of Russ Kroker. An American college student, he visited Malawi in 1968. He noticed that most of the country was out of touch with most of the world. If you lived in Ndevu Village, your understanding of the world stretched as far as Chipoka, a few kilometers away. Now, Russ Kroker was no nuclear physicist, but he had a basic idea of how a radio works. He bought a few items available in the local hardware shop: a battery, some wires, you get the idea. Before long, he had imagined and invented the Nzaru radio. Within a year, every village had a radio and people were listening to the BBC, to Voice of America, singing rock and roll music, and learning about things like college and innovations in agriculture, and tips on improving health. Russ had walked through a valley of dry bones and imagined bringing some life to those bones! The very next year, we arrived in that country, bought an Nzaru radio and listened to Neil Armstrong take that first dramatic step on the moon!

I think of Rosa Parks riding that bus through the dry bones of segregation. She looks out the rear window of that bus and sees how tired people are, how frustrated people are, how dry their bones have become. We can hear the voice of God speaking to Rosa Parks, "Can these bones live?" And God elbows her to get herself to the front of the bus, to the front of the line, to the place where her voice will be heard and will make a difference. And she speaks with her feet. God invited her to use her imagination, to picture in her mind a day of freedom when everyone is valued as one of God's own children. And everybody knows the rest of that story!

Imagination matters. Can these bones live? Elizabeth Horton Sheff had imagination as she walked through the valley of bones known as Albany Avenue. Nelson Mandela had imagination as he walked through the valley of bones known as Apartheid. Jonas Salk had imagination as he walked through the valley of bones known as polio.

Rochelle Ripley had imagination as she walked through the valley of bones known as the Cheyenne River Reservation. We could go on and on naming the ways Ezekiel's prophecy has come to life through the centuries.

But Ezekiel would have us know that we all have this divine gift of imagination. We all find ourselves, from time to time, in a valley of dry bones. We all find ourselves wondering whether these dry bones can ever live again. It is for each of us to identify with that original valley walker and to pay attention to the bones, to see what appears to be hopeless to the surrounding culture; and then to be the voice of encouragement, the voice of hope, the voice that allows the hip bone to be reconnected to the thigh bone and the thigh bone reconnected to the shin bone and all the rest.

Ezekiel gives us a vision of Resurrection! He invites us to imagine a new day. And he actually expects us to be the women and the men who usher in that new day!

I think I have told you about my Anthropology class at Trinity University. Our professor took us out on a dig. Instead of finding shards of pottery and remnants of adobe huts and evidence of ancient beadwork; we found bones, mostly pieces of bones, tons of pieces of bones. We gathered them and we arranged them in the Anthropology laboratory. We stared at them for weeks, and we failed to see how any one of the pieces fit with any other piece. Then, one day, a visiting professor happened into our lab, looked at the bones, and immediately started to assemble them into a skeletal structure. We stood there, awed. The difference was that we students couldn't imagine the bones being anything other than old dry bones. But this visiting scholar instantly imagined a four-legged coyote and began to bring that critter back to life before our very eyes.

It is when we use God's gift of imagination that life takes on the abundance that God intends for us.

Could we imagine South Church owning a house on High Street that would be a refugee house where families from war-torn countries would first land and reside for a year; then move on making room for the next family?

Could we imagine building a wing onto the High Street School for elderly housing so that the pre-schoolers and the post-schoolers could have snack time together?

Could we imagine our church basement being a retreat center where visiting youth groups from Tennessee could sleep as they worked with Hartford Habitat for Humanity?

Could we imagine a South Church 'put and take' where gardeners could drop off surplus zucchini and hungry people could pick it up?

Could we imagine a Joyful Noise Orchestra as well as a Joyful Noise band?

Sisters and brothers, let us imagine together a day when the wolf and the lamb will lie down together, and both will get a good night's sleep! I believe it's when we do this work of imagining that the dry bones come back to life, and that we find ourselves living in the greatest of hope! Amen.