

Let My Bones Dance (1/3)

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“Them bones is gonna rise again.” I don’t know about you, but I had heard the old spiritual long before I ever read or heard the text in Ezekiel 37. I remember being in summer camp in North Carolina, long before I knew enough American history to know what the song was all about, and wondering at this song that we sang with so much relish, as we jumped and danced to its rhythm. To this day, I cannot read this passage without translating it back to what for me is the original version, “Them bones is gonna rise again.”

I am still convinced that in the old spiritual there are insights into this text that most of the scholarly commentaries I have been reading completely miss. We shall come back to that later.

First, however, it is important for us to look at the text itself, leaving aside the old spiritual for the time being, in order to see what it says. As we do that, it is clear that I am not the only one who comes to this text with such previous understandings. Indeed, the very framers of this Conference have done that. “Let the Bones Dance!” they chose as the theme for this conference. And they based that theme on Ezekiel 37.

But look again at the text. There is nothing here about bones dancing. Again, “Let the bones dance” may be a very good theme, and it may be intimately connected with the spirit of this passage. But the text says nothing about dancing.

Actually, when I think of dancing bones I do not think of Ezekiel, but of Halloween, and of those dancing skeletons that people hang from their doors. I think also of one of those late medieval “dances macabres” of dancing skeletons by which people both expressed their fear of death and attempted to get rid of that fear by laughing at it.

It is perhaps out of a combination of these Halloweenish traditions of the dance macabre with the undoubtedly catchy rhythm of the old spiritual, “them bones is gonna rise again,” that we look at this text and say, “Let the Bones Dance!”

The text begins with words that we may find strange: “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.” Ezekiel begins most of his sayings by simply saying: “The word of the Lord came to me.” Even a quick glance at the book will produce many places where those words occur. Indeed, here in chapter 37, right at the end of the text we are studying, the next prophecy begins in v. 15: “The word of the Lord came to me.” But our text begins differently, with Ezekiel being carried elsewhere by the Spirit. This is the manner in which Ezekiel normally introduces those visions that take him to a different setting. In Ez. 8:3, he says: “He put forth the form of a hand, and the Spirit lifted me between earth and heaven, and brought me in visions of God to Jerusalem, to the entrance of the gateway of the inner court that faces north.” Then, in 11:1, he moves to another setting, “The Spirit lifted me up, and brought me to the east gate of the house of the Lord.” And in the same chapter: “And the spirit lifted me up and brought me in the vision by the Spirit of God into

Chaldea, to the exiles.” It is not that Ezekiel moves with supersonic speed from setting to setting, but that he is describing a vision that takes him to another place while he stays put.

In this case, the Spirit takes him to “the valley,” although we are not told what valley this is. In any case, the valley was full of bones. The imagery is probably either that of a battlefield or that of a large caravan in the desert that has been covered by a sandstorm, and that the wind uncovers years later, showing nothing but dried out bones and dried remnants of past wealth.

God asks the prophet if these bones can live, and he answers: “O Lord, thou knowest.” The phrase is too short for us to know whether it is meant as an expression of doubt: “Lord, thou knowest that they are as dead as can be. They are gone. Forget it.” Or whether it is meant as an expression of faith: “Lord, since it is you who makes things live, you know if these bones will live.” No matter what is meant, one thing is certain. The bones are dry. There is no life in them. Of themselves, they cannot live. If there is to be new life in them, this can only be by an action of God.

This brings us to an important point in the faith of Israel and in the faith of the New Testament. Creation and redemption are works of the same God, and equally miraculous. The God who in the beginning, according to the Genesis story, “separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament” is the same God who in the book of Exodus parts the water of the sea, so the Israelites can be liberated from servitude in Egypt.

In the exile, the prophets spoke of the return to Jerusalem in terms of a new creation:

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings forth chariot and horse, army and warrior. . . Behold I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Is. 43:16-20)

The bones are dead. Dead. Dead. If they are to live again, it will only be by a mighty act of the same God who called creation into being. It is for this reason that the rest of the vision is strikingly parallel to the creation stories in Genesis.

This connection between creation and salvation, between creation and redemption, continues throughout the entire Bible. Indeed, this is what is meant in the famous passage in John 3, where Jesus says to Nicodemus that it is necessary to be born again. Nicodemus rightly understands that this is no easy matter. How can one be born again? he asks. Can one who is already grown up re-enter one's mother's womb and be born again? To which Jesus answers, just as Ezekiel did, that this new life is no simple matter that one can claim for oneself. It takes a mighty act of God, an act as overwhelming as creation, as mysterious as birth.

Back to the valley of the dry bones. God says to Ezekiel: "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

Now that's strange. If the bones are dead, how can they hear? You go out talking to dead bones, and if you are not a prince of Denmark in a Shakespearean tragedy, you are just plain crazy. But

that is precisely what God commands Ezekiel to do: “Say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.”

The reason is that the Word of the Lord is not just an empty sound. We in the twentieth century have lost much of the sense of the power of words. We tend to think that words are no more than sounds by which we communicate ideas –or, as the medieval skeptics would say, words are no more than the wind of the voice. But it is not so in Scripture. Most especially, it is not so with the Word of God. In Scripture, when God speaks, that which God pronounces comes to be.

Referring again to the Genesis stories, which this text in Ezekiel so closely parallels, God said, “Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters”; and it was so. And God said, “Let there be waters under the firmament be gathered together”; and it was so. And God said, “Let the earth put forth vegetation”; and it was so. And God said, “Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens”; and it was so. And God said, “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures”; and it was so. And God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures”; and it was so. And God said, “Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness”; and it was so. What God speaks, God creates. Or, as we read in the prophet Isaiah, “So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (55:11).

No, in this valley of dry bones, where there seems to be no reason for hope, God commands the

prophet to speak to the bones. But he is to speak not just any word. He is to speak the word of God And this is to be a word of re-creation: "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." And, as in the Genesis stories, it was so: "And as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them." In short, God said, "let there be". . . and it was so.

Still, as in the Genesis story, these bones in the shape of people were not people. They were not alive. Or, as the prophet says, "there was no breath in them." You will recall that in Genesis 2 we are told that "the Lord God formed the human creature of dust from the ground and breathed into its nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being."

This is a matter that needs clarification. There is an entire tradition of Western thought that tends to blame our human predicament on the fact that we are made of dirt, and that in this dirt we carry the breath of God. According to this tradition, our problem lies in that in us which is material, and our hope in the spiritual. But that is not what the text in Genesis says. The text says, yes, that we are more than dirt. But the text also says that we are made of good dirt. This is the dirt that God made, and God saw that it was good. The breath of life that God has given us has been given in order to live in this body of dirt –or, in terms of the passage from Ezekiel in this body of bones and sinews and flesh. One is not complete without the other. When the Bible

says that God loves you, what the Bible means is that God loves you, spirit, dirt, flesh, bones, warts, and all. And, let it be said in passing, when we seek to show God's love for others, we must show that love in concern, not only for their religious state, but also for their physical and mental state.

As in the two-stage story in Genesis, where God forms a body and then breathes life into it, our text also includes a second stage. In verses 9 to 10 the prophet is told to speak the word of God again, this time commanding the breath (which in Hebrew is the same word as wind and as spirit) to come into the reconstituted bodies and make them live. And it was so. "The breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host."

The text says nothing about dancing. But I suppose we can allow that license to the framers of this conference. After all, can you imagine what it would be like? The prophet makes his point by understatement, by not even attempting to describe the joy and the surprise of these people raised from the valley of dry bones. But we can imagine what that would be like. Hey Joe, man! Wow, Mary, you look as good as new! Hey, look! I can move my hands! I can bend my knees! Them bones is gonna dance again!

In verse 11 we come to the interpretation of the vision. The prophet and his listeners are in exile. In the year 597 B.C., a large number of Jews, Ezekiel among them, had been forcibly taken off to Babylon to live as exiles. Ezekiel's own life was shattered. He belonged to the priestly

caste and should have been a priest, except that when he became thirty years old, the age at which he should have become a priest, he was in exile hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem. The people were dejected, torn away from the land they considered home, and made to serve the mighty and unbelieving Emperor Nebuchadrezzar. Their mood is poignantly described in Psalm 137:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.

Or, as our text in Ezekiel says, the exiles are devastated to the point that they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off."

And it is to this downcast and downtrodden exiled, hopeless people that God sends the message of the dry bones come to life: "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 live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it." In other words, as in the creation story, God has said it will be so, and it will be so.

Now we can return to that old spiritual, and really appreciate some of its insights. First of all, there is the insight of the tremendous, unbelievable joy involved in Ezekiel's vision. Them bones is gonna rise again! Others throughout Christian history have read this vision and written very

profound thoughts about it. But no one got to the heart of its message as deeply nor as clearly as that unknown Afro-America, probably an illiterate field hand, who first sang: "Them bones is gonna rise again!" That is no coincidence, for no one could hear the message of Ezekiel as clearly as could that Afro-American, whose bones were drying up in the cotton fields, whose hope languished in exile. To this, however, I plan to return tomorrow, and therefore there is no need to say more today.

Secondly, the old spiritual moves beyond the message of a return to the motherland in Jerusalem to a message of personal resurrection. It is not clear whether Ezekiel intended this other meaning or not. In any case, later interpreters, both Jewish and Christians, did see in the vision of the dry bones a message of resurrection. And so did our later Afro-American poet and prophet who first sang, "Them bones is gonna rise again."

The theme for today is "Let My Bones Dance!" There are only two ways in which we can let our bones dance. One is by forgetting all the pain that is part of life; by obliterating from our minds the suffering and injustice under which a large part of humanity is living right now; by refusing to look death in the eye, and dancing as if death were not our lot. When you look at it that way, dance is very symbolic. It is like running in place, like trying to escape from the inescapable, like one of those nightmares I used to have, where something was about to get me, and my feet kept slipping as I tried to run. And we dance, and we move, and we jump, simply to forget we cannot escape. And we make loud music, and we laugh, and we shout, so as to obliterate the

sound of reality. In the end, one is reminded of the words of the Apostle Paul: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Then there is another way in which we can let our bones dance. We can let our bones dance because we know that “Them bones is gonna rise again.” Oh, yes; we know that much of life is like dry bones. But them bones is gonna rise again. We know that there is suffering and injustice; but we can fight it, and fight it unto death, precisely because “Them bones is gonna rise again.” It may happen in this life –and we are to live as those who expect it to happen in this life. But if it does not happen now, we still know that “Them bones is gonna rise again.”

There is a commonly held notion that the expectation of life after death leads to acquiescence with this world’s ills and injustices. History disproves that notion. Whenever a Christian group or an individual has dared to raise a prophetic voice of protest and to lay their lives on the line for the cause of justice, it has been precisely because they have had a strong conviction that death will not have the last word. There is no earthly power that can subdue the voice that sings, “before I’ll be a slave, I’d be buried in my grave, and be home to my Lord and be free.” And the modern-day prophet could lay his life on the line for the cause of justice because he truly believes that, even after the enemy had meted out his worst, even from beyond the grave, he would continue singing: “Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, free at last.”

Let your bones dance. Let your bones dance, not in a ghostly dance macabre in which death has

the last word, but in the joyful dance of those who know that the Lord of the dance is also the Lord of life and death, and that “Them bones is gonna rise again!”



