

Sinews of Hope

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Text: Ez 37.1-6

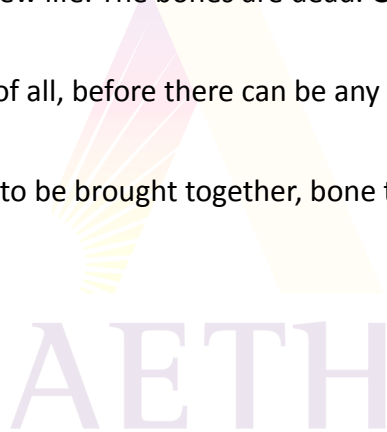
As we approach the final days of Lent, one of the lessons that the Revised Common Lectionary assigns for this week is the well-known vision of the dry bones in the book of Ezekiel. It is an appropriate lesson for this time, when we stand at the end of Lent, facing the worst times of the arrest, the trial and the crucifixion, yet going through it all as we look forward to the resurrection, ascension, and glorification.

It is very easy and even comforting to use the hope of Easter to soften the harshness of Lent. However, without the dull dreariness of Lent and the sharp anguish of Good Friday we miss much of the glory of Easter itself. While it is true that the pain is bearable because of the promise, the promise itself is greater because of the pain.

Ezekiel begins with a vision of pain, defeat and death. The valley of dry bones he describes would remind those who heard him of a battlefield after the victors have carried their dead and wounded and have abandoned the defeated there to die and rot. What Ezekiel sees is nothing

but death and desolation. It is not just a matter of individual death; it is the destruction and dismemberment of an entire people.

Then comes the surprising, almost unbelievable promise: through the work of the Spirit of God these bones will live again. Were we to read the entire story, we could easily see in it the promise of what we celebrate on Easter. That is good; but let us not jump too quickly from the valley of death to the breath of new life. The bones are dead. God will restore them to life, yes. But this will take a process. First of all, before there can be any sign of rebuilding – and much less of new life – the bones have to be brought together, bone to bone, with sinews joining them.



Actually, what comes to life is not the bones themselves. What comes to life is the body to which the bones belong. Separately, the bones can never come to be what they are intended to be. They need sinews, they need connections, they need to be joined together.

The first sign of the promise of new life is the joining of the bones by sinews that connect them, and it is these bones connected by sinews that are the very framework to which flesh and skin and breath are then given.

The vision of the dry bones is particularly relevant to us, not only because it is now this time of the year that we call Lent, but ever more so because as we look around it seems as if the entire world is facing a Lenten period, not of 40 days, but of 40 years – or perhaps even 40 generations. The earth, the seas and the skies are being polluted. The ice caps are melting. The oceans are rising. We have not turned our swords into plowshares, but into nuclear weapons. In the name of the God of life, or rather of the idols of nationalism, of ideology, and of religion, we seek to destroy one another. At our very borders, and throughout the world, human misery has become a political tool.

In the midst of this, the church, the body of Christ, is seen as lying dismembered, almost like dry bones. In our very land denominations that once were flourishing are now declining. Prophets are considered weird, and weirdos are followed as if they were prophets. Not only in our nation, but in many other parts of the world, the heresy of Christian nationalism flourishes. The same is true of a heretical gospel of prosperity. And sometimes the two are entwined.

On a much smaller scale, but touching us directly, something similar may be said of this enterprise of theological education in which we are engaged, and to which many of us have

dedicated our lives.

To say that seminaries and schools of theology are in crisis is simply to state what we all know.

There are clear signs of this in the difficult economic conditions in which many seminaries and schools of theology find themselves. In this country, institutions of long standing are in financial crisis. Some have closed. Others have sold their properties and merged into a larger institution.

Many are struggling. Registration is dwindling. Traditional curricula seem to be less and less relevant. In many there is a crisis of vision. In Latin America, what used to be the flagship of protestant theological schools is now closed. In Spain, a Roman Catholic seminary built half a century ago for several hundred students is now closed – an empty building reflecting empty churches.

The logo for AETH features a stylized, multi-colored triangle (pink, yellow, and purple) above the letters 'AETH' in a light purple, serif font.

Even worse, there are institutions that remain convinced that they will not be touched by the present crisis. They are prestigious. They have a large endowment. They have no problem. Yet, that is precisely their problem, for in a time of crisis there is no greater danger than ignoring the crisis itself.

Dry bones all around! And yet, these bones shall live again! How will this come about? In a way, all we can say is, like Ezekiel, "O Lord God, you know!"

But Ezekiel's vision gives us a hint: God's very first step in giving new life to dry bones is to connect them among themselves. "Suddenly, there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them." or, as the old spiritual put it:

Leg bone connected to the knee bone.
Knee bone connected to the thigh bone.
Thigh bone connected to the hip bone.
Hip bone connected to the backbone.

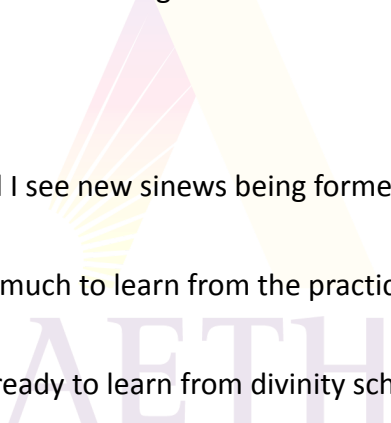
And the promise of the spiritual is also true: "Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around." But they ain't gonna walk around by themselves. Bones are not intended to live on their own. They are intended to live as part of a body. It is only as part of a body that they can live.

Today, as I look at the entire field of theological education, I too hear a rattling, a rattling of bones coming together. And it is in that rattling, sometimes barely noticeable, and sometimes quite evident, that I see the promise of new life.

Them bones is gonna walk around, but they will not walk around if the hip bone says to the

backbone: “because you are not a hip bone you are not part of the body.”

There is a promise of new life for theological education. There is a rattling of new life in theological education. But I do not hear that rattling when a divinity school says to a bible institute: “because you are not ATS-accredited, you are not part of theological education”; nor do I hear it when a bible institute says to a school of theology: “because you are exploring all sorts of new ideas, you are not part of theological education.”



I hear the rattling of new life, and I see new sinews being formed, where professors at divinity schools recognize that they have much to learn from the practice of bible institutes, and where professors in bible institutes are ready to learn from divinity schools. I hear the rattling of new life when a distinguished professor is willing to sit at the feet of a Sunday school teacher, and when that Sunday school teacher is empowered to teach in the presence of the professor. I hear the rattling of new life where theological education is seen as a continuum going from the cradle to the tomb, from catechesis to graduate school; and no step in the process claims to be better or more important than the rest.

The rattling that we hear is the sound of broken bones becoming the body of the one whose body was broken for them. It is the pain of Lent and the promise of this coming week. It is the promise of all ages: "Them bones is gonna rise again!" And they will rise, the thigh bone connected to the hip bone.

So, listen to the rattling. Come, join the rattling. Them bones gonna walk again.

Amen.

