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February 28, 2010
Orphaned – 2 Kings 25:8-21

Read 2 Kings 25:8-21.

In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet Ezekiel shares a vision that he had where God set him in a valley full of dry bones. And as Ezekiel is standing in this vast world of deadness, God asks him, “can these bones live?”

“Can these bones live?”

There are times in life when we stand in the despair of our lives with our hopes and dreams mocked and destroyed and dead dry around us. And life has been sucked from our very existence. The air feels stale and we are cold not only to ourselves but others as well.

I am a fan of Frontline on PBS and their next program they will be airing is called “The Suicide Terrorist.” The show is about people suffering from terminal illnesses that reach such devastating points in their lives that they go to Switzerland to participate in a physician-assisted suicide.

The advertisement I saw said.

“I am dying. ... There is no sense in trying to deny that fact,” 59-year-old Craig Ewert says of his rapid deterioration just months after being diagnosed with ALS, a motor neuron disorder often referred to as Lou Gehrig’s disease.

“I’m not tired of living,” explains Ewert, a retired computer science professor. **“I’m tired of the disease, but I’m not tired of living. And I still enjoy it enough that I’d like to continue. But the thing is that I really can’t.”**

That is a valley full of dry bones.

Many of you have lost jobs or have at least had to consider the prospects of losing your job in the last year. The uncertainty of your future and the stress of paying the bills must feel as if you stuck in a rut of darkness.

And then there are diseases and illnesses that impact us all in some way in our world. And violence and drugs, and we could go on forever. For many of us we know what it is like to stand amongst the feeling of emptiness, and deadness . . . to walk in a land of dry bones.

Others of us have committed sins in our life that have left a wake of consequences that bowl us over at times. We feel as if no matter how hard we try to overcome obstacles in our lives, they keep popping up. The same temptations we struggled with 10 years ago . . . are still here today.

A little over a week ago now, Joseph Stack, a 53 year-old-man crashed his plan into a building in Texas. He killed himself and another person in the building. And on his website he posted a manifesto outlining his rage and hurt. He went on for pages, but he began,

“If you’re reading this, you’re no doubt asking yourself, “Why did this have to happen?” The simple truth is that it is complicated and has been coming for a long time. The writing process, started many months ago, was intended to be therapy in the face of the looming realization that there isn’t enough therapy in the world that can fix what is really broken. Needless to say, this rant could fill volumes with example after example if I would let it. I find the process of writing it frustrating, tedious, and probably pointless... especially given my gross inability to gracefully articulate my thoughts in light of the storm raging in my head. Exactly what is therapeutic about that I’m not sure, but desperate times call for desperate measures.”

He too stood in a world full of dry bones and heard calling to him God’s question, whether he knew the sources or not, “can these bones live.”

In many ways our world can feel like a land of dry bones. And we all ask ourselves the question, “can these bones live?”

This is where God's people were at in our passage this morning. They were distraught and dejected and felt hopeless and helpless. In our passage this morning we hear that Jerusalem is destroyed. The center place of the faith is entirely destroyed by the invading Babylonians.

The original Israelites at this time had divided into a Northern Kingdom and a Southern Kingdom.

(MAP) The Northern Kingdom was known as Israel and the Southern Kingdom was known as Judah. It was in Judah that the King had continued to come from the lineage of David. At various times throughout history, Judah had been controlled by different ruling empires, but by the 600's BC Judah had achieved its independence.

What also makes this period of history interesting is that we don't know a lot of the details because nearly everything we know comes from 2 Kings 21-25, supplemented by 2 Chronicles 33-36. **The coverage is fairly meager and there are many gaps.**

In the years before our passage, Judah, the Southern Kingdom of God's people - the one that maintained the Davidic dynasty, had been held within the Assyrian Empire. Judah had had an up and down history with its kings. Some good and some bad. The years before our passage were no different. What was fascinating though is that God seemed to always follow up a particularly bad king with a good one.

Judah had been ruled by a particularly bad king Manasseh for several years. He was submissive to the Assyrian Empire and was succeeded by his son Amon, who continued his policies and was even worse. He was assassinated after a couple years of rule and **his son - an 8 year old Josiah became king.**

Simultaneous to Josiah's acceptance of the throne was the crumbling of the Assyrian empire, which permitted Judah to become a free and independent nation.

We don't know much about Josiah's early years of rule - after all he was only 8 and probably spent most days watching Spongebob. Actually, he was probably just filling the throne while other officials made decisions. But a few years later, while Josiah was still young . . . but more mature, Josiah led Judah into the most thorough-going reform in Judah's history. This reform is outlined in detail in chapters preceding our text, 23-24.

2 Kings 22 points out that one of the motivations for Josiah's reforms was that while they were making repairs on the Temple **someone found a copy of "the book of the law."** This motivated Judah to refocus itself on what they believed to be the desires of God. They thus began a process of repudiating the official Assyrian cult and to purge its idolatrous practices. They destroyed rival temples and killed their priests.

Josiah also closed all the outlying shrines of Yahweh throughout Judah and centralized all public worship in Jerusalem. (raised its significance) All this was accompanied by a resurgent nationalism. The reforms gave political expression to the ideal of a free Israel united once more under the lineage of David.

The strict return to adherence of the law, did for a time, return the people to a greater sense of public morality. But the reforms did not run as deep as could be hoped for. The prophet Jeremiah complained that the reforms had produced nothing but increased cultic activity without real return to truly following God. In fact, the people of Judah had begun, perhaps unconsciously, to believe that as long as they strictly adhered to God's rules, they would be protected from all their enemies.

They quickly learned this was not the case, however. The great reformer, King Josiah, was eventually killed in battle and his son was named king. Judah lost its independence again and was dominated by Egypt, with their new king basically working for Egypt. All the reforms stopped, pagan practices started to creep back in and public morality deteriorated.

Eventually Babylon claimed Judah from Egypt and upped the stakes for Judah. Judah again went through several kings ending with Zedekiah. This is where our passage picked up. The Babylonians breathing in on Judah and Zedekiah sticking his tongue out at them.

And the Babylonians rushed Judah and Jerusalem and destroyed it. Jerusalem was stubborn, but their destiny was unavoidable. Their food supply eventually disappeared and the Babylonians rushed in. Zedekiah was shown no mercy. He witnessed the execution of his sons, was blinded and taken away to Babylon where he died. Jerusalem was torched and leveled.

The land was completely wrecked. Its walls destroyed, its economy ruined, its leading citizens killed or deported – with the remaining population consisting chiefly of poor peasants considered incapable of making trouble.

Jerusalem was wholly unprepared to handle what had happened theologically. Based upon God's promise to David, they believed that Judah's independence and security were eternally secure. But never before had Judah known such humiliation. **Yahweh's temple was looted of its treasures, and the legitimate Davidic heir was taken captive in a far away land. (PIC)** No one expected that God would ever allow this to happen to them.

It is into this context that the prophet Ezekiel spoke from God and declared Judah as a land of dry bones because they had been corrupt. He articulated that the destruction of Jerusalem was Yahweh's righteous judgment.

Judah's return to faith under Josiah had proven hollow. They rushed back into the ritual and rules of the Israelite faith, but it was hollow. It was transactional. There was no relationship with God.

At a stroke her national existence was ended and with it, all the institutions in which her corporate life had expressed itself.

This was compounded by their defeat by a pagan power. Are the gods of Babylon more powerful than Yahweh? The temptation to lapse from their faith was severe. Israel's faith was on trial. With evidences of undreamed of wealth and power around them, with the magnificent temples of pagan gods on every hand, it must have occurred to many of them to wonder whether Yahweh, patron God of a petty state which he seemed powerless to protect, was really the supreme and only God after all.

Verse 21 of our passage simply says, "So Judah went into captivity away from her land." The Message says, "Judah went into exile, orphaned from her land."

I like that translation because it hits us with a deep sense of loss. To be orphaned is to lose stability, and security, and in many respects hope. It is terrifying and lonely.

And what happens in these times . . . and this happened for the people of Judah is that we believe in the tragedies of our daily existence . . . that God has abandoned us. That as they were orphaned from their land and independence and institution . . . they were also orphaned from God.

But as the prophets revealed that the calamity was a result of Israel's sins, they gave the tragedy coherent explanation and permitted it to be viewed, not as a contradiction, but as a vindication of Israel's historic faith. **The exile could be seen both as a merited punishment and as a purge preparing Israel for a new future. The prophets also assured them that Yahweh's purpose was the ultimate restoration of his people.**

Fascinatingly, years earlier God had sent the prophet Isaiah, who not only predicted the Jews' exile, but also gave them hope for a new future. He portrayed Yahweh as a God of incomparable power: Creator of all things without assistance or intermediary, Lord of heavenly hosts and forces of nature, no earthly power could withstand him, or any likeness whatever represent him. The pagan gods he satirized with savage irony, calling them chunks of wood and metal who could do nothing in history because they were nothing. Yahweh is first and last, the sole God beside whom no other exists.

For Isaiah, the exile was Yahweh's righteous judgment on Israel's sin, but it involved no surrender of his purpose, **for it was his intention, having purged Israel, to redeem.** He thought of the afflictions of his people as renewed Egyptian bondage and wilderness wandering. He therefore described the coming deliverance as a new exodus.

This would not be a rehabilitation of the old order as King Josiah had attempted, but this would be the great turning point in history. Yahweh's rule was to be universal and all the nations would recognize Yahweh as God. Yahweh would rule the whole earth.

Isaiah then promises that the Servant will achieve this final victory. When Israelites, leaders and people alike, willingly follow Yahweh's Servant, enduring their sufferings uncomplainingly, making of themselves sacrificial victims in the service of the divine purpose – then the promised triumph will come to pass. **We now say till “the fullness of time” when the pattern of God's Servant found fulfillment in Him who was crucified and who rose again.**

God eventually gives Ezekiel the answer to his question, “can these bones live?”

“This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

“come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live . . . they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”

“. . . O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.' ””

The dry bones will rise to new life. But they arise not through the institution or relied upon past promises . . . they arise on the promptings of God and the participation of God’s followers.

It is the same for us in those times in our lives when we are standing amongst the dry bones whether because of our own sinfulness or simply the circumstances of our lives.

We want to rush towards practices and institutions and “fixes” and sometimes these can help, but they are not the solution. What we need is new life breathed into us and there is only one source of that.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, “I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”

Sources Consulted:

Bright, John. [A History of Israel](#). Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981.