



*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely*

Once again this week, we read a prophet speaking to the people of Israel
during their exile in Babylon

Ezekiel, who in Jerusalem had prepared to be a priest,
is in exile with other religious, political and intellectual leaders
of his people.

And this is their lament.

*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely from our home and from our God*

As I was studying this week,

I had a sort of revelation about the people in exile in Babylon.

I was watching the video of Ezekiel created by the Bible Project,

and they describe and picture the Israelites in a refugee camp in Babylon.

Somehow that image of a refugee camp brought the real despair and desperation
of exile home to me in a new way.

There is no comfort, few possessions from home, no sense of a future
beyond tomorrow's struggle for survival in a foreign land.

Bible scholar Michael Chan writes that Ezekiel's community

*lives life with an open wound. A dense fog of loss lingers over the exiles long after
the clamor of warfare has receded into the past. What remains is a dull void of
hopelessness and despair.*



In the midst of this shared misery, Ezekiel has a vision.

He is set down in the midst of a valley filled with dry bones,

and the Spirit of the Lord says to him, "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel may have his doubts, but you don't say no to the Spirit of God, so he says,
"O Lord God, you know."

And God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones –

to speak God's words to the bones, that they might have life again.

This is one of the great stories of the Bible,

and part of the reason is the sensory detail it includes.

Ezekiel speaks to the bones, and then he hears a noise, a rattling,
as the bones begin to move and come together, bone to bone.
Then the skeletons become bodies, covered with sinew and flesh.
But they have no life.

And God says to Ezekiel, Prophecy to the breath –
tell the four winds to come and breathe upon these bodies, that they may live.
It is like the story in Genesis, when God makes a human body out of dirt,
and breathes life into it –
but multiplied by 100's.



One of the wonderful parts of this story is the way it plays on the word Ruach.
Ruach is breath – the breath the bodies need to live.

Ruach is wind – the wind that comes from the four directions
and fills the bodies with life.

And Ruach is spirit – in this case, the Spirit of God, who alone can give life.
The Spirit comes into the bodies, and they live and stand on their feet,
a vast multitude filling the valley.

What Ezekiel is given, to share with the people dried up in despair,
is a visual imagination of hope.

It is a picture of what hope can be when
despair is not allowed to have the last word.

And it is an imagination made possible and real by the Spirit of God,
who says, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,
and you shall know that I, Yahweh, have spoken and will act.”

The people of Israel have been lost because they have turned from God,
worshiping idols and trusting in other nations to protect them.
Now God reminds them – it is I, Yahweh – the God of your ancestors –
the God who brought you out of Egypt and made you my people –
It is I who will bring you from your graves and give you life.

Can these bones live?
Yes, because I am the God of new life and new hope.



Any time we read this story, we are reminded of the song,
Dem bones dem bones dem dry bones – now hear the word of the Lord

Many of us learned it as children, because it is such a fun one to sing –

The picture is of a children's book based on the song:

*The toe bone connected to the foot bone,
the foot bone connected to the ankle bone,
the ankle bone connected to the leg bone – now hear the word of the Lord.*

But the song also carries a deeper memory and meaning
as a spiritual, sung by the enslaved African people in this country.
The enslaved people would sneak out of their shacks at night
to have unsanctioned worship services that would focus on freedom
and their own religious experience.
These secret and dangerous faith communities connected their experience
to the stories of Israel and Jesus.
They heard this story of new life for dry bones,
and dared to let it nurture hope within them –
hope for life beyond the hell in which they lived
hope in a God who freed the oppressed and healed the sick
and raised the dead to life again.

We do not know such desperate circumstances in our lives.
Yet most of us are familiar with lament.
With loss and grief, with fear for ourselves and our families and neighbors,
with depression or addiction.
And this second Sunday of Advent finds us, too, longing for hope
which may seem hard to see in the world around us.



My favorite devotional author, Duke Divinity professor Kate Bowler,
is again offering a series of reflections for Advent.
The devotion for Advent Day 3 is called “Hope is not optimism”

Optimism, she writes, is a fine dinner guest—easy to sit beside, cheerful, always sure dessert is coming. But when the conversation gets heavy, optimism pulls out. Optimism promises that things will “all work out.” But we know the truth: Sometimes they don’t.

Hope, on the other hand, isn’t embarrassed by reality. It knows the world is unfinished, unjust, fragile—and still it insists: God is not done yet.

“Optimism and hope are radically different attitudes,” said writer and theologian Henri Nouwen. “Optimism is the expectation that things—the weather, human relationship, the economy, the political situation, and so on—will get better. Hope

is trust that God will fulfill God's promises to us in a way that leads us to true freedom."

See the difference? Optimism says, "Things are fine."

Hope says, "Things are hard. But God is here."

Advent does not invite us to be optimists. Advent invites us to be hoppers. Not because everything is fine (it's not), but because God is faithful.

Her devotion is accompanied by this painting - *Hope*, from *The Theological Virtues: Faith, Charity, Hope*, by an Italian Painter around the year 1500.

In this painting,

The figure of Hope stands with a phoenix at her feet, a symbol of resurrection. Painted against a shared horizon with Faith and Charity, this panel embodies Christian hope as something rooted not in denial of the dark, but in trust that new life will rise again.



The Advent season is for us a season of waiting and longing.

Our bones may feel dried up – from the struggles of life, of politics, of grief.

We are waiting for God's spirit to enter the world in a new way.

And as we wait, God invites us into a prophetic imagination of hope.

Not optimism – not pie in the sky, everything will be ok by and by.

But hope founded deeply in the promises of God.

Our hope is rooted in trust – trust that our God, Creator of heaven and earth,
is also the one coming into the world as Immanuel, God with us.

He is the Messiah, the Resurrection and the Life,

in whom we place our hope for eternal life, now and in the future.

As we wait, God invites us to open our imaginations to hope.

We are invited to enter God's story, which is also our story;

and when we have our hope restored,

to speak the words of life and love into this hurting world.

Thanks be to God

Amen