

THE VALLEY WITHIN

This morning we journey with our old friend Ezekiel, to that foreboding and desolate place, the Valley of the Dry Bones. The Prophet takes us to a well-traveled locale, in a story we all know, and into a setting unlike almost any in the Bible. I doubt there are parishioners or people in this or any other church who are not familiar with this story and with the remarkable vision and experience of that lonely yet faithful traveler. The Valley of the Dry Bones has been the source of many a sermon and many a volume of theology. Indeed, I always recall that for the very first sermon I ever preached at seminary, some 34 years ago, in a time of youth and vigor, I chose this very piece of the Old Testament for my topic. The haunting experience of Ezekiel has shaped and formed my thinking and my feeling ever since.

Almost without fail, this scene from scripture is used as a metaphor for the whole church, or more broadly, the wider society. Most sermons written on the Valley see the dry bones as the house of Israel, however you understand and interpret that. Thus, by extension, it is easy to understand the dry bones as representing many a group, church, organization, workplace, family or gathering in this and other ages. As human institutions, we fall on hard times, sometimes very hard

times. And as human institutions and as human beings we are challenged to experience such places of desolation and testing. But remember at the outset, as the first lines of this scripture say: *“The hand of the Lord came upon me, and He brought me out by the spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the middle of the valley....”* Regardless of the despair and desolation, it **is** God who guides us here and it **is** God who sets the scene before us. Even in the worst of it, we are never alone.

It is also quite tempting, indeed it is rather easy, to see in this bleak vision a description of our own, current, tattered, anxious social fabric. Without much effort you or I can drive through parts of Worcester or Springfield, Hartford or New Haven, or Lawrence or Providence or probably neighborhoods and forgotten streets right in our own backyard, or a hundred other places and see - and literally experience - the kind of emptiness and desolation and apparent hopelessness which so starkly faces and confronts Ezekiel. We need not look far to witness the seeming destruction of order, the apparent abandonment of hope, the rather obvious proliferation of grief and pain. Indeed, there is not one Valley of the Dry Bones; there are many.

Some years ago, during an especially difficult and transitory time in my life, this harrowing vision returned

vividly to me (as it periodically does). I set out for a walk, to “walk off” the anxiety and the tension and the fear and confusion which I was feeling. I remember, like it was yesterday, that the once warm April skies soon turned sullen and gray. Rain began to chase me toward shelter until I found myself sitting alone in Beaver Brook Park, in the middle of Worcester, possessing nothing but my troubled thoughts, my unquiet spirit, and my fragile heart. I needed then, as I often do now, to settle my soul and to find light where only darkness was visible. The streets and sidewalks were devoid of people, the old abandoned factories and run down houses made me feel, in a way, that I too was right now - in that moment - living in this Valley of Dry Bones; that I too was no better off than the forsaken prophet in his bleak desert, that I too was being strangely led by the hand of the Lord out into some awful and awe-filled place. I had arrived at a locale and at a moment as raw as raw can be, and I was frightened. And then, sheltering myself from cold rain on the outside and from churning spiritual tumult within, it hit me, and it hit me then, that rainy April day, as it never had hit me before. Even though I had read Ezekiel dozens of times, this passage of scripture took on a new and terrifying and yet hopeful meaning that I had never before fully understood, and it was this: The Valley of the Dry Bones is

not always an outside setting at all; instead, it is sometimes that very place within me, and within each of us, where we are compelled and forced and driven out into desolation so as to face our own deepest fears, our own enduring pain, our own darkness and our own tears.

I remain convinced that such a valley exists in every living being and that part of the experience of growth and development and soulfulness and spirit is to be, at times, cast and led by God into just such an empty place. It is easy to think that God's humbling message is about the church or about society or about the world or about anything or about someone *OUT THERE*, outside of us. And yet, the genuine challenge and the Gospel mandate is to understand that such a place is really deep within, *inside*, as a fundamental and beloved part of who we are and of how we minister.

For the addicted the valley of the dry bones is that place of destruction and enslavement; for the abuser that valley is the place of pain received and pain inflicted; for the lonely that valley is the place of utter abandonment and isolation; for the priest that valley is a place of spiritual dryness and desiccation; for the neglected that valley is the place of hopelessness and fear; for the ill that valley is the place of mortality and hurt; for many a congregation that valley is a place of transition and

change and uncertainty, of that which is ending and of the unknown which yet lies ahead. And in its most radical expression, and picking up where I left off last week, the Valley of the Dry Bones is the cross that each of us carries, on our own *Via Dolorosa*, through the tortured streets of our own lives, amid the taunts and jeers and spite of the mob, to our own personal Calvary. To our own Gethsemane. To our own personal place on that symbol of both death and hope. To our own personal agony on that rocky and forsaken hill, and ultimately to our own empty tomb, though that surely can feel far, far off. You and I must know and experience this, and we must pray for renewal, we must pray for repair, we must pray for revitalization, and most of all we must pray for resurrection - not just our own but for the whole of creation, in all its brokenness and in all its frailty.

Just as Ezekiel is led by the "*hand of the Lord*" into that valley so too are we guided by God. I would argue that this is one of the most crucial, painful, and yet vital moments in the life of faith - trusting, believing, even affirming, that here, even here, precisely here (!); even amidst this ruination, God is not only present but God is in charge, and God is actually leading me and leading us. The Valley is a time of testing, and it is an awful crucible in which our souls shall be forged into

something new, a proving ground of the Spirit. Our temptation (certainly my temptation) is to be angry with God and to flee from such trials. And yet, as Ezekiel knows and as we discover at the Empty Tomb, God has not abandoned us and God has not forsaken us. Even if we sometimes leave God, God never leaves us. The challenge comes in simple words, spoken directly to you and to me, in our moment of gravest fear: "*Mortal, can these bones live?*" Spoken another way, in the great drama of Lazarus, the words are from Jesus himself: "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live...Do you believe this?*", [John 11:25] we are asked. And those last four words are at the epicenter of it all: "*do you believe this?*" Well, do you? Do we? Because that, brothers and sisters in Christ, is the very heart of the matter. And how we live, once we have answered Jesus, is life itself. Period.

The challenge could not be more clear nor more blunt: where *is* our faith to be found ~ your faith, my faith ~ in the Valley of Dry Bones? To whom and to what *shall we turn* in our moment of deepest fear and pain? On what *shall we rest* our sorrows and our loss? Yes, God brings us to this place, of that there can be no doubt. And it is a place of awfulness and tears, of blood poured out on dry rock and of voices crying in the

wilderness. Of that there can be no doubt. But God does not leave us there to die. Because, the promise of redemption and the hope of resurrection is genuine. If we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, if our faith in God is real, we shall be brought through to that new and better place: *"Thus says the Lord God - I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people;...and you shall know that I am the Lord...I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live..." [Ezek. 37:12]* Life is affirmed, not denied. Hope is fulfilled, not mocked. The faithful are strengthened, and not struck down. We are made whole again, and not broken. We are put back together, and no longer torn apart.

It is the Promise, clear and concise, delivered to us in our moment of greatest weakness and uncertainty and need. It is the promise of redemption, the promise of forgiveness, the promise of the Holy Spirit, the promise of the empty tomb, the promise of the resurrection, the promise of newness of life and of life everlasting. And all this - all this - rises from the desperation and the desiccation and the desolation of the Valley of the Dry Bones.

And so my beloved brothers and sisters, when you are at that place within yourself and in your life, when you find yourself sifting the parched sands between your own weary

fingers, when your souls thirsts out for the water of life, when you face abandonment in the foreign land of your very soul know this and heed the word of God: *"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act."* **[Ezek 37:14]**

~ Amen.