



“This was a week for cynics to shrug their shoulders” is the lead sentence in a New York Times article dated April 4, 2014 by Serge Schmemmann. The author recites several efforts this week – places and events where the cynic says life is gone or is in the process of dying. Failed Middle Eastern Peace talks. Failure to locate the flight data recorder of Malaysian Flight 370 before the pinging stops. Wild bison fleeing Yellowstone with fears of an imminent major volcanic eruption. Continuing earthquakes. Killings at Ft. Hood. And the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. reminding us that his dream has yet to become reality in its fullest.

Pick your story- they are all over the news and in many of our lives. Places or situations where one who believes in each of us having opportunities to live in peace and harmony, where life is fair and all have enough, where money is useful and not a weapon of influence don't seem to exist anymore. Even here in Crawfordsville, there is cynicism around upcoming elections- will anything really change? Will we ever find ways to rebuild this community into what it once was? Maybe that's the wrong question to ask- maybe the question ought to be: where is there positive, life-affirming action here –and there is- and then secondly, how can we spread that positive energy and outlook into more and more people?

“Mortal, can these bones live?” – the Lord asks the prophet Ezekiel.
Ezekiel - *wisely* - answers: *“O Lord God, you know.”*

Ezekiel is a prophet who has not had many good things to say to God's people. He, together with many of the Israelites, is in exile in Babylon– away from the place where the people believed God resided. Away from the life he had known – the comforts of friends and family.

One wonders, as you read the book of Ezekiel, what he was smoking in the parlance of the '70s and '80s. He has such visions- *really, really* weird. After all, the book of Ezekiel

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45; Ps. 150

starts with his vision of a flaming wheel with eyes all around and with 4 living creatures; 4 faces – one like a lion, one like an ox, one like an eagle, one like a human; 4 wings.

Why would I believe *anything* Ezekiel has to say when he sees visions such as this? No wonder tradition had it that anyone younger than 30 was not to read the book of Ezekiel. It was too weird and might set you to wondering what God was up to – whether God even existed let alone whether God participated with humankind in this world.

And if this vision of the valley of the dry bones in today's reading isn't enough, Ezekiel insists that God spoke to him. God called Ezekiel to be a prophet to Israel whom God admits are a nation of rebels who have turned against God. They are impudent and stubborn.

God sends Ezekiel forth offering scant comfort. Do not be afraid he says of their words, though briars and thorn surround you and scorpions abound. Do not be dismayed at their looks.

Now, if I was Ezekiel, about this time I'd be looking for most any reason to say "thanks, but no thanks." But Ezekiel hears and follows the word of God – even to eating of the scroll, symbolizing God's word made an integral part of Ezekiel. Perhaps to Ezekiel, eating of the scroll of God's word puts them "deep in my heart, I do believe" to capture part of the lyrics of "We Shall Overcome" sung so often and so associated with the Civil Rights movement and the changes in our society during the 1960s.

And Ezekiel goes forth to the people of Israel in exile reminding them that they are the chosen people of God. That their God is the one God. *Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one.*

And now we get to the Valley of the Dry Bones. What has happened to those Israelites that the chosen people of God had lost their way, even unto death? What has happened to their faith that God was with them that their land was overrun by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians and so many were taken into exile in a foreign country. Surely many of those in exile believed that life as they once knew it was over. That life was like a valley of dry bones – bones so dry that it was surely impossible for them ever to live again. How to go forward when what you see in front of you and behind you and to both sides of you is death and desolation. How do you have hope in this situation? Where do you turn to find the courage and strength to move forward?

*Mortal, can these bones live?
Surely you know, O God.*

As we continue our Lenten journey, it is a good time to think about our own life. Where and what are the dry bones in your life? Are there things that we have let wither and die? Should we have let that gift or talent go unused? Or do we need to pick it up and polish it off – and once again use that gift or talent for the glory of God? Is there a friendship that

we let slide- we're too busy. We've gone our separate ways Maybe we need to reconnect with that friend or that family member.

Forensic anthropologists are scientists that work with bones to figure out what caused death. The TV series "Bones" or the novels by Patricia Cornwell or Tess Gerritson feature forensic anthropologists as the protagonist. Their job is to take dry bones and figure out what happened- either within an hour's TV program or within a couple hundred pages of a novel.

Why are so many fascinated by these stories? Perhaps we just like mysteries. Perhaps because there is something fundamentally intriguing about dry bones having a story to tell. Even dead, there are stories to tell and lessons to be learned.

*Mortal, can these bones live?
O Lord God, you know.*

The story of Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones remind us that God is more than we can possibly imagine. That God, through the spirit- the breath – the Holy Spirit – can make even dry bones return to life.

It's also instructive that even when the bones rise and the sinews connect them together and flesh covers the bones and the sinews, they are still not alive.

Tempe Brennan of the TV series *Bones*, Kay Scarpetta of the novels by Patricia Cornwell, and Rizzoli and Isles in the novels by Tess Gerritson can tell a lot from bones. In a short one-hour TV program – or maybe a 300 page novel, these forensic anthropologists can tell us how the person died. Leading, of course, to finding the murderer. But at the end of the show or the novel, the person is still dead- the bones are still without life.

In Genesis, chapter 2, verse 7, God forms humankind from the dust of the ground. At that point, the human is just dust - inanimate. It is only when God breathes into the nostrils of this clump of dust that it became a living being. It is not until the breath of God is breathed upon us that we truly live.

“Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived.”

The breath came from the four winds- from throughout the whole world. There was no place where the breath of God does not exist. They lived once God's breath came into them.

What is your life like when you turn your back on God's holy ways? When you ignore the breath of God that wants to fill you from top to bottom. Ezekiel would tell you that you are dead. You are as dead as those in the valley of the dry bones. Without the breath

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45; Ps. 150

of God, you are not truly alive. But with the breath of God, you are alive. With the breath of God you can leave the valley of the dry bones. With the breath of God you shall live.

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones, they need the breath of God.

The foot bone is connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone is connected to the leg bone, the leg bone is connected to the hip bone- and all are connected to God.

We are but dry bones unless and until we are connected to God. And until God breathes into our life what we need to truly live. Connected to ourselves and to each other and with a vision of what is possible when the breath of God is the vital thing necessary to be human.