

“Dry Bones”  
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,  
concerning Ezekiel 37:1-14  
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,  
on April 2, 2017

There came a time after the days of the Israelite kings, after the years of the Israelite judges, long after God’s people traversed the wilderness and arrived in the Promised Land, after the people had been liberated from the bonds of slavery in Egypt, after God had called forth a nation out of the barren womb of Sarah, after God’s original good work took leave of the Garden—long after all these things there came a time when the spirits of God’s people went bone dry.

They name this dark valley: The Exile.

Exile. Noun. The state of being barred from one’s country or home.

Exile. Verb. To expel or banish, to separate from one’s country or home, deport, displace, drive out, discard, dismiss.

Exile. Biblical History. Exile refers to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, 597 – 538 B.C.

Exile. The Soul. In spiritual terms, exile means that feeling of being abandoned or rejected by God, that experience of being sent away from one’s spiritual home or ripped away from one’s spiritual family, of being on your own in a foreign place while haunted by God’s silence.

Exile.

God’s people walked through this valley of the shadow of death, watched their dreams lose flesh, fall limp at their feet. They stood in the graveyard of their hopes, and they could not breathe. Trying to remember God’s provision was like wading through skeletons—everything good was in the past. If you had asked them how exile felt, they would have said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

If anyone had asked, “Can these bones lives?” the bones themselves would have wept in despair and the memories one stores in one’s bones would have wailed, for this was the valley where one’s faith met demise. Call it a deathtrap, call it a depression, call it a rotting pile of bones, it is just another way to say, “I am in exile now.”

The only sort of moisture I know about that exists for those in exile is the sheer waterpower of our stories. There is no quicker way to dry out one’s bones than to deprive them of their stories.

There is a lament about exile in the book of Psalms in which the people say, “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion (our home). On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to

the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you.” There is no quicker way to dry out one’s soul than to deprive it of its stories and its memories of home.

Listen, I want you to tell your bones to pay attention! Why let those bones dry out before they’ve heard their stories?

Here is another story about bones: this one is not from the Bible but from the Pueblo people of the Southwest, and I’m going to tell it in the exact words Clarissa Pinkola Estes tells it, and she tells it like this:

*The sole work of La Loba, Wolf Woman, is the collecting of bones. She collects and preserves especially that which is in danger of being lost to the world. Her cave is filled with the bones of all manner of desert creatures: the deer, the rattlesnake, the crow. But her specialty is wolves.*

*She creeps and crawls and sifts through the mountains and dry riverbeds looking for wolf bones, and when she has assembled an entire skeleton, when the last bone is in place and the beautiful white sculpture of the creature is laid out before her, she sits by the fire and thinks about what song she will sing.*

*And when she is sure, she stands over the creature, raises her arms over it, and sings out. That is when the rib bones and leg bones of the wolf begin to flesh out and the creature becomes furred. La Loba sings some more, and more of the creature comes into being; its tail curls upward, shaggy and strong.*

*And La Loba sings more and the wolf creature begins to breath.*

*And still La Loba sings so deeply that the floor of the desert shakes, and as she sings, the wolf opens its eyes, leaps up, and runs away down the canyon.*

*Something in its running, whether by the speed of its running or by splashing its way into a river, or by way of a ray of sunlight or moonlight hitting it right in the side, the wolf is suddenly transformed into a laughing woman who runs free toward the horizon.*

*So remember, if you wander the desert, and it is near sundown and perhaps you are perhaps a little bit lost, and certainly tired, that you are lucky, for La Loba may take a liking to you and show you something—something of the soul.*

Clarissa Pinkola Estes calls this story a resurrection story. She says when *La Loba* sings over the bones she has gathered that “to sing means to use the soul-voice. It means to say on the breath the truth of one’s power and one’s need, to breath soul over the thing that is ailing or in need of restriction.”

I am reminded of what God said to Ezekiel, saying, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord . . . Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal . . .” Remember the story? Remember that time when the spirits of God’s people went bone dry, how they called it *exile*, how later it would happen again, and they would call it a *crucifixion*?

I stumbled across a line of poetry this week that said, “If you will be the prophet, I will be the bones.” I was captivated by that line and decided I wanted to know the context and hear the rest of the poem. I must admit, once I found it, I didn’t much care for the rest of the poem or resonate with the poet, except for this one part. It was actually a poem about the Mother Mary, and she is lamenting over the broken body of her son, and God says to her, “Mary, if you will be the prophet, I will be the bones.”

Perhaps, during the season of Lent while we are waiting, waiting for God to die and then rise, God is waiting for us to prophesy, waiting for us to use our voice and cause, instigate, or call for a resurrection.

When God asked Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel did not presume to know the answer. “You are the one who knows,” he answered, which I interpret as a sign of his faith, for in the valley of death, to reject the posture of certain despair is about the same as choosing hope. God honored this crack in Ezekiel’s despair, and told him to go ahead and prophesy.

When God instructed him to start talking to the bones, I wonder if Ezekiel began to wish he hadn’t left it up to God, otherwise he wouldn’t be here in this bone yard, attempting to converse with death and convince it to relent. What a ludicrous notion—talking to bones.

But of course, these weren’t *just* bones. They were bones that stored memories of God, bones that remembered how it was to be mere dust inhaling God’s breath to become a living being.

Perhaps this all sounds a bit abstract, but I bet if I asked you about your experience with exile, or about the exile experience of someone you love, you could tell me a story that is very real. So imagine you are standing in that valley where the stench of rotting dreams can still turn your stomach. Imagine someone asks you, “Can these bones live?” You don’t have to know the answer. All you have to do is wonder whether God knows something about the future that you don’t.

Amen.