

The toe bone's connected to the foot bone...the foot bone's connected to the heel bone...the heel bone's connected to the ankle bone...

Well, you get the point. And you're probably already familiar with these lyrics to a song inspired by today's passage from the Prophet Ezekiel. It was written by either James Weldon Johnson or his brother Rosomond, and recorded in 1928 and has since been recorded many times by many artists. This was not the first or the last of numerous ways culture has used the Valley of the Dry Bones. Our younger folks may recall the Skeleton Koopas, also called Dry Bones, from the Super Mario Brothers 3 video game. All of us can think of movie scenes that remind us of this passage, movies like the Indiana Jones series, or The Mummy. Who knows, maybe even the Walking Dead television series was inspired by Ezekiel's vision. These days there is more than a passing interest in the "living" dead. Not my cup of tea, maybe not yours either, but none of us seem to be as squeamish or put off by images of dry bones and dead people walking as we once were.

Of course, Ezekiel doesn't actually see these dry and scattered bones come together and reconnect with sinews and flesh and skin, and that's fortunate for him. According to chapter 19, verse 16 of the book of Numbers, "Whoever in the open field touches one who has been killed by a sword, or who has died naturally, or a human bone, or a grave, shall be unclean seven days." What Ezekiel does see is a vision given to him by God. We should also note that neither Ezekiel nor any others of the prophets asked to become a mouthpiece for God. As Abraham Heschel writes in his book, *The Prophets*, "The prophet does not volunteer for his mission; it is forced upon him. He is seduced, he is overwhelmed. There is no choice. Yoked in the knowledge he is compelled to receive, he is also under stress of the necessity to declare it." Heschel also reminds us that prophecy is not knowledge or information gained through reflection or introspection; and it's not quiet or simple. "It is a startling event: a thunder in the world and a lightning in the soul."<sup>i</sup>

Ezekiel begins his account of this vision with the words "The hands of the Lord came upon me." I came across an old lectionary insert from Morehouse Publishing which capitalized those words "THE HANDS OF THE LORD." It reminded me of the reverence and respect used by the ancients when they referred to God. The prophets don't speak of seeing God's face, but of the feeling of God's hand upon them. "God's hand" is a way for the prophet to speak of God's power and strength of God and a way to describe the overwhelming urgency of the task God has put upon him and the enormous pressure he feels to respond to it. While our contemporary minds conjure up images from movies and video games and even songs, we cannot experience the impact felt by Ezekiel when God brought him to the valley and led him in circles around the "very many" bones lying there.

How might you or I have responded if God said to us "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel's response seems both quick and wise, "O Lord God, you know," but there are two possible ways to interpret his answer. Does he realize what God is about to do? If so, his answer affirms God's power. But if he's deflecting the question, he's surely surprised when God instructs him to prophesy to bones that are so dry there is nothing left to remind him they once lived. Ezekiel is called to take a leap of faith to speak God's words of promise that the bones will live once again. When he recounts how the bones come together, bone on bone, we can almost hear them rattling. And once they are restored with sinews and flesh and skin, we truly are reminded of the walking dead. But God is not finished yet, with Ezekiel or with the reassembled bones, and as the story continues we learn who the bones belong to and the depth of God's mercy, grace, and generosity for them.

Have you ever used the expression, "I can't believe my eyes?" If you have, it was undoubtedly in response to something you considered to be at least improbable, maybe even impossible. Perhaps that was how Ezekiel responded as he watched the many bones of "the whole house of Israel" come

back together. These were his own people, people who once had names and families, who had breathed and worked and worshiped God. When they say to him “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost,” Ezekiel surely recalls to himself the history of these God-chosen people, his people, and their long and hard struggle to follow and obey God. And when he hears God’s promises to them, perhaps he stops seeing them through his own eyes and begins to see them through God’s eyes. With God’s vision and power, what was hopeless becomes hopeful, and the improbable becomes possible. The story of the dry bones of Israel and the resuscitation of Jesus’ dear friend Lazarus that we hear from John’s gospel today remind us that nothing is impossible with God. And in just two weeks, we’ll celebrate Easter and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest evidence ever of God’s power and glory.

During this season of Lent, we have an opportune time to examine our own spiritual lives, the ways that we practice our faith, and how we nourish our relationship with God. Most of us can think of times when we’ve been spiritually as dry as the bones of Israel, unable to pray or even to pretend to pray, disinterested in participating in our community of faith for worship or study, fellowship or anything else. At the worst times, our dryness can turn to despair and hopelessness just as it did for the people of Israel, and at those times we may feel the need for God’s spirit to come breathe some life back into us, too. These last two weeks of Lent present a good opportunity for us to look closely at our own spiritual bones. What would our answer be if God asked us that question, “Can these bones live?” Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who died just last year, noted that *every* generation needs to hear in their own time that these bones can live. All of us need to be reminded to look through God’s eyes, to see God’s vision for our lives.

At the beginning of this sermon, I mentioned to you some of our contemporary cultural references to the valley of the dry bones, including the Skeleton Koopas from Super Mario Brothers 3. That game was released by Nintendo in 1988, still the early days of video gaming. My son was eight years old when it came out, and he and his friends could sit for hours playing that game and others. To tell the truth, I was often right there, playing the games with them. The Skeleton Koopas were particularly difficult to deal with because it was almost impossible to get past them. They would collapse but then revive again to continue on their adventures. It’s doubtful, of course, that God had anything at all to do with Skeleton Koopas; but they give us a good example of how our spiritual lives can be revived again and again. Just as God didn’t give up on those dry bones, God won’t give up on us, either. When we find ourselves in the valley, with dry bones and dry faith, we can be certain that God’s Spirit is there, ready to resuscitate us just like the bones of Israel were resuscitated.

As the psalmist writes, “For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem.” Thanks be to God! And amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Heschel, Abraham. *The Prophets*. HarperCollins, New York, 1962. p. 568-569.