

Of Sin, Justice, and Judgment

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 John 16: 4b-15

You may recall three years ago that an enterprising archaeologist named Philippa Langley discovered the long lost bones of King Richard the Third. Found under a parking lot, not long ago the remains were given a proper royal burial in the town of Leicester at Leicester Cathedral. Richard III was the last of the Plantagenet dynasty and, in 1485, the last English king to die in battle.

Richard III was depicted by Shakespeare as a deformed tyrant who murdered his own nephews, one of whom was the rightful king. This view is not difficult to imagine given the way royals have behaved historically. However, that story line is challenged by other authorities who say Richard was targeted by propaganda after his defeat in battle by Henry Tudor, later King Henry VII.

Now it seems that the same archaeologist believes she knows where to find another long lost and much older royal, King Henry I. Henry I was the first king after the Norman conquest in 1066 at battle of Hastings. Henry I was the fourth son of William the Conqueror. Henry I took the throne in the year 1100 when his brother died in a mysterious hunting accident (from Dick Cheney's family tree?). Henry I was known to have been the first Norman king to speak English. If Philippa Langley is successful, it would mark another of the most important archaeological discoveries in Britain in recent times.

The discoveries of skeletal remains of a long by-gone era can still make quite a stir, reminding us of the difficult and tumultuous times of these royals and their key roles in the transactions of history. However, we frankly have no interest in seeing them alive once again. Yes, they are figures of history, but that doesn't mean that they were necessarily valued in history. At least their remains were found and properly identified.

When we read the vision of Ezekiel in chapter 37, the valley of dry bones, there are no identities, even in the most general terms. Having been brought by the Holy Spirit of God to this desolate valley littered with dry bones, the prophet gets asked, *Mortal, can these bones live?* Wisely, the prophet responds cautiously, *O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.* You and I, not so wise, would have said, *Nah! Are you kidding?*

For Ezekiel, the wise and faithful one, God has an instruction: *Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'* Ezekiel is going to be preaching to the dry bones on the valley floor, possibly the only body of God's people that is less emotional than Presbyterians. (I said, "possibly.") In the act of prophesying, Ezekiel is commanding the word of God, invoking the power and presence of God himself at God's command. The prophet in his faithfulness is fully transparent as a vehicle for God's will and his voice as a medium for God's power.

The prophesying command to the dry bones includes the promise of breath and life, uniting the scattered bones and bringing them to renewed form and substance with

tendons, muscles, and flesh. All this happened, but there was no breath, no life. You'll recall how breath, wind, and spirit are all the same word in Hebrew. You can see the translator's problem, but I think the NIV translators miss when they have the Lord telling the prophet: *Prophesy to the breath*, and then *Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may live*. It's peculiar to have the prophet prophesying to "the breath" and then saying "Come ... O breath." By opting for "the Spirit," it makes perfect sense to *Prophesy to the Spirit* and then say, *Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe into these slain that they may live*.

Then we have the prophet summoning the Spirit of God, the life-giving Spirit who would come from all the winds of the world to bring breath to the bodies, to the dry bones. This would fulfill God's word, a demonstration of God's power to heal and bring new life.

In vs. 11, we have the vision explained. No, it isn't about resurrection *per se*, and certainly not any foretelling about Jesus. Addressing the prophet again, God explains: *these bones are whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'* Not about resurrection of the body, but about the restoration of the people of God. Ezekiel is prophesying amid the devastation, walking among a grief stricken, depressed, and oppressed people at the time of the exile in Babylon. When God hears them saying that they're "cut off," they mean cut off from their God, abandoned and thrown on the trash heap. Their relationship is broken and there is nothing left for them without their God.

But God takes the clear and plain evidence of the world's disclosure – the dry bones scattered – and transforms them, bringing them together in unity, restoring their shape and form and purpose in a new way. Yet the process is incomplete. God brings the critical ingredient for their new life into the equation, the Holy Spirit, breathing in life where there had been death, purpose where there had been emptiness, and unity and healing where there had been scattered brokenness. What the world had presented was supposed to be the end of discussion, the fact that was incontrovertible and unredeemable. God took what the world had provided and stood it on its head, bringing life out of death. It isn't resurrection, but then again, it is. And the key is that final act of summoning the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit brings new life to what the world had given up on and cast aside. The refuse of the world is transformed into the treasure of God.

When Jesus addresses his disciples in John 16, he is preparing them for his departure from them. He understands their state of mind. They may have realized as Jesus has that the powers of the world will not let Jesus proceed. They are coming to put an end to his ministry that has threatened their authority, challenged their assumptions, and broken through their traditions and social and political and economic structures. His kind of threat has been encountered before, and it has always been successfully dealt with through the arrest and execution of the leadership. That time is now coming for them.

Jesus suggests that this is not only necessary, but good. He says, *Unless I go away, the Counselor [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you.* Jesus' ministry has not only been the announcing and proclamation and demonstration of the reality of the good news of God which he bears. It has also been a preparation for this day, a series of lessons for his disciples, training them for the time when Jesus would depart and his ministry would pass into their hands. Jesus knows that the one thing they need is that key ingredient through which the transformative occurs, the Holy Spirit.

Jesus then articulates the three things that the Holy Spirit will do with them, will do with the world's authority and claims in transforming them to reveal God's will and purpose, and Jesus' promise of new life amid the kingdom of God. The language isn't always clear, but he announces that the Holy Spirit will *convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment.* The language suggests another instance of a trial, the showing of evidence, the hearing of witnesses, and the rendering of a judicial decision.

First, *in regard to sin, because people do not believe in me*, Jesus says. In this, we should not think of this narrowly, as if Jesus is saying that if people do not get saved in Jesus, then they will be convicted of sin. We miss the point revealed in the complete three point statement if we take that very narrow view, and it just happens to serve a particular narrow theology as well. Looking bigger, we know how Jesus took the world's understanding of sinfulness and showed its shallowness, particularly in light of the legalistic restrictions that have seemed so all-important to Judaism. Sin was not to be defined by what you eat, what you do on the Sabbath, or what group you were born into. Sin was about failing to do the work of God in the world, failing to heal the sick, failing to feed the hungry, failing to embrace a brother or sister in need, *in any kind of need.* Much of what was studiously regarded as sin was trivial and unimportant and just plain wrong in the scope of what God needed from his faithful in the world. Jesus brought a new focus and attention to what God wanted and how the faithful people of God had failed, missing the truly sinful with silly stuff, and letting genuine sinfulness gain a free hand. If, as Jesus said, people do not believe in Jesus **about sin**, then they continue to be distracted by the stupid and inane things that the world considers sinful. God's work in the world suffers as God's people suffer, as conflict and violence are justified, poverty and disease are rationalized, greed and pride are esteemed, and brokenness is allowed to be permissible and even a sign of God's condemnation – all wrong, wrong, wrong. Believe in Jesus and sin is no longer what the world professes, but is revealed in Jesus.

Second and related, *in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father where you can see me no longer.* Well, what does that mean? The word translated as *righteousness* can also be equally rendered *justice.* In the context of what the world has provided, the world's idea of justice will be to execute Jesus and have him return to his Father in heaven. This isn't justice, but the world will tell you this is a good, righteous and reasonable definition of justice. However, it is fraudulent. The Holy Spirit will reveal true justice which God provides in the kingdom. God's justice is to take the worldly death sentence carried out against Jesus and turn it into a statement on fulfilling the promise of new life with the resurrection. The Holy Spirit will reveal the

truth of justice as a genuine reflection of the love, grace, and peace of God and the way of the kingdom.

Third, *in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.* “The prince of this world,” the master of corruption and fraudulence, of deceit and exploitation, of oppression and violence, is starkly revealed in the light of the good news of Jesus and his promise of hope and new life. The prince of this world had always been accepted and expected, with the world obedient to the terms and conditions set forth, no matter how ridiculous, how unjust, how flawed, how mean spirited, or how corrupt. In the judgment, the world’s ways now stand condemned. The Holy Spirit brings the light of Christ into the hearts, minds, and vision of the faithful, transforming what had been accepted and expected with exposure of its fraudulence, its sinfulness, its death-dealing and hopelessness. The prince of the world creates valleys of dry bones, but through the Holy Spirit, God’s faithful in Jesus will be empowered by the Holy Spirit to bring new life, hope, unity, and peace.

We rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is the key ingredient of God’s providence that empowers the faithful to do the Lord’s work in ministry. We are empowered now to prophesy, if we dare, if we have faith. We are to prophesy amid the valley of dry bones, to call forth life and summon the breath, and become witnesses to the kingdom that heals, reconciles, and makes new. May we seize the Spirit’s blessing and reveal the emptiness of the ways of the world while shining the light on the Lord’s way to his blessing in the kingdom of new life.