

“Pneumatic Faith”

Ezekiel 37.1–14

The Rev. Hal Chorpensing, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 9 March 2008

This is probably one of the few passages from the rather long book of Ezekiel that most of us know, and it paints a haunting image of a valley – perhaps a battlefield – of human bones being brought back to life. And there are certainly different ways of reading the story. It’s important to understand a little of the historical context in which it was written. Ezekiel was both a prophet and a priest – two religious types that didn’t often get along very well with each other in ancient Israel. Priests were often concerned with purity and holiness, while prophets tended to issue warnings from God about the injustice of the system. One was the establishment, and the other was the movement. But, Ezekiel embodied them both. Ezekiel was writing in the sixth century B.C., at a time when the prominent members of the kingdom of Judah had been taken into exile in Babylon – obviously a period of tremendous trial for the people.

And Ezekiel issues forth this amazing scene: a valley of dry bones, and God tells him to prophesy to the bones: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!” And the God will cause the bones to be resurrected, covering them with flesh and breathing life-giving breath to flow into the bones.

In Hebrew, the word *ruach* and in Greek the word *pneuma* both mean the following things: breath, wind, and spirit. In Genesis, God breathes *ruach* into the lifeless clay that would become human.

I read this story as a parable: a story with one meaning that also throws along side it the opportunity for us to enter the story. “Mortal,” God says to Ezekiel, “these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.’” But, it is more than just an allegory about Israel. . . . It is about us.



How many failures have you had in your own life? Occasions when you didn’t measure up to your own or someone else’s expectations? When you didn’t make it over the bar? When you couldn’t accomplish something critical? And where did it leave you: Feeling decimated? Feeling . . . dis-spirited?

We all have failures. We all have brokenness in our lives. I don’t know exactly where you are feeling broken, but I know keenly the places in my own life where I have felt absolutely dis-spirited.

Part of the wonder, the privilege, the glory of being human is that we get to decide whether and how we will prophesy to the dry bones of our own lives. How we will face the desiccated remnants of our own human failings and shortcomings. Will we look upon the dry bones of brokenness and failure and say nothing? Or will we say to our own failures: “O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord”?

We opt into the Spirit. We allow the *ruach-pneuma-spirit* to blow into the dead places within us. We cry out to our failures: “Hear the word of the Lord!” as we challenge the dried-out places within us to become verdant, as we invoke the *wind-ruach-pneuma* to blow through the lifeless places within us.

We see the possibilities of Easter moments – resurrection moments, new beginnings – within our own lives when we allow the spirit to blow through us and literally inspire us.



We can do this in our inner lives and in our national and global life as well. It was the context of the national life of Israel that Ezekiel prophesied. It would be a mistake to hear Ezekiel as being *only* inner or personal.

It is 1915. Half a million Armenians are killed in a genocide. When the world looked at the dry bones of genocide, we said nothing.

It is 1942. The mass killings of Jews at Auschwitz has begun. When the world first saw the dry bones of genocide, we said nothing.

It is 1975. The killing fields of Cambodia claim the lives of between 1.7 and 3 million people. When the world saw the dry bones of genocide, we said nothing.

It is 1993. "Ethnic cleansing" becomes a familiar euphemism for genocide as more than 200,000 Muslim civilians are killed in Bosnia. When the world saw the dry bones of genocide, we finally acted and brought it to a halt.

It is 1994. The UN mission chief in Rwanda warns that genocide could happen soon. Within 100 days, more than half a million people are dead. When the world first saw the dry bones of genocide, we said nothing.

It is 2008. The genocide in the Darfur region of the Sudan has been going on for at least four years.¹ Hundreds of thousands have died. And finally, we are saying, "Hear the word of the Lord!"

Genocide is a phenomenon made possible by the killing machinery of the modern world, and somehow, we still have trouble calling it to a halt. One of the things that our media can do for us today is make information readily available. And still we are reticent to act.

The photographs are etched into some our minds. Can you picture in your mind the corpses stacked in Nazi death camps? Can you envision the stacks of skulls in Cambodia? Does the image of exhumed corpses in Bosnia haunt you? Can you remember pictures of stacks of dead bodies in Rwanda?

"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 a valley it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry."

There is no way for us to bring the victims of genocide back to life. But, there are ways for us to make current genocide known, understood, and unacceptable.

It is true that some positive steps have been made in relation to Darfur, but Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir must be kept to the commitment he has made to the UN and the African Union to allow peacekeeping forces. So far, he has stonewalled efforts to implement his commitments.

This is a humanitarian crisis of massive proportion, so what are we to do? For a start, we do *something*. We don't sit on our hands and say, "Isn't that too bad."

One thing you can do is to inform yourself. Learn about Darfur and the Sudan. Learn the history of the crisis in Darfur. (There will be links from this sermon to information from the BBC, *New York Times*, and Canadian Broadcasting Corporation that provide the facts.)

¹ for a timeline of events in Darfur, go to <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/sudan/darfur.html>

for a good Q&A piece, go to

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/3496731.stm>

for a recent article on China's relations with the Sudan, go to

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/08/world/asia/08darfur.html?_r=1&hp&oref=slogin

A second step is to take action. There are now links on the front page of Plymouth's website to two organizations: Save Darfur and Church World Service. (Your giving to One Great Hour of Sharing helps support the UCC's giving to Church World Service, so that is taking action, too.) There may be other actions we can take relative to the Sudan's greatest ally, China, which of course is hosting the Olympic games and gaining the international spotlight.

A third step is to pray. And in our praying to commit to God that we will never stand idly by while God's children are being slaughtered.

We can't do everything, but we can do *something*. I have asked our mission and social concerns committees and our peace with justice ministry team to work collaboratively to take some action around the crisis in Darfur. So, I expect that you will hear something from them in the coming weeks.



We live in the penumbra of some of human history's darkest shadows. And we are in a position to use our influence and our moral suasion to do something about genocide. God has sat us down in a valley full of bones. And it is us – you and me – who are called to prophesy, "Hear the word of the Lord."

It is a word of hope and of promise and of life. When Nelson Mandela was released from his imprisonment on Robbin Island, he thanked churches around the world for keeping pressure on the Apartheid regime of South Africa. Without that pressure, Mandela might never have been released.

Genocide is not just a fixture of the past, but of the present. And we, my friends, must stand up and say, "No more." We must be the Ezekiels of the 21st century who boldly proclaim, "Hear the word of the Lord!"

Amen.