

Almost three weeks ago, archaeologists discovered a mass grave in Colonial Williamsburg, some 150 miles from us here in Alexandria, Virginia. The archaeologists believe the gravesite is from the 1862 Battle of Williamsburg. They don't know for sure, but they believe that the bones they discovered were both Northern and Southern antagonists in our American Civil War.

We don't know yet how many people's bones were in this mass grave. However, there were 3,843 casualties among the 72,591 combatants at that battle.

When I read about this discovery, I was pondering today's first lesson, which tells of the prophet Ezekiel's very famous vision of God restoring life to long-dead bones. So, I wondered, were these bones so recently discovered in Williamsburg "dry bones?" A Google search told me that only two or three years are required for bones to lose their marrow and become "dry" if they are exposed to the elements or buried. Therefore, after 161 years in the ground, these ones in Williamsburg certainly would have been "dry." Even the clothes these bones had worn were gone.

What this means is that God has given us our very own boneyard here in Virginia to contemplate, as God had given a boneyard to his prophet Ezekiel almost 2,600 years ago.

Ezekiel was in captivity in Babylon at the time of his dry bones vision, in a community of exiled Jews in a place called Tel Abib, some 590 miles from Jerusalem. Tel Abib was a pleasant enough place, but Tel Abib just wasn't home. Ezekiel's people had despaired of EVER getting to go home, of ever being truly **free**.

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Amid this sense of hopelessness and despair, God told Ezekiel he would gather his people from all over Babylon, he would return them to the land he had promised them, and he would renew his covenant with them. In other words, God told Ezekiel the people's exile—their “time out” for putting themselves ahead of God—would be over.

This is when God gave Ezekiel a vision that proclaimed God's power to restore all things, even situations that seem utterly helpless.

You know of Ezekiel's vision; you heard of this vision in our first lesson today and you have likely heard the “dry bones” story **BEFORE**, likely **many** times before. The gist of Ezekiel's vision is that God—the God who created all things out of nothing—is fully capable of a new creative act, capable of returning long-dead people to full life.

This is, indeed, what God did in the year 538 Before the Common Era by restoring the Jews who had been dispersed throughout Babylon to their home in Israel. And God did, indeed, renew his covenant with his people: They would worship God and God would bless them. The people got to go home, and they got to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem.

This is not just Good News; it is great news, miraculous news. Our God is the God of hope, the God who restores us when we have repented and returned to him.

The problem is, though, that we have come to count on God restoring us. We, like the people in Ezekiel's time, forget what God has done for us. In other words, just like those of old, we reanimated humans are still the same old humans; we still have a choice about who to worship, ourselves or God.

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Maybe, when troubles assail us, what we want is for God to give us our “good old days” back so that we can keep on being our “wayward old selves.” How quickly we forget:

- We forget that God gives us life.
- We forget that God wants a relationship with us.
- We forget that God wants us to treat all other people justly. Actually, we forget that God wants us to treat **all of creation** justly, not just all other people.

In our own time, in our own Commonwealth of Virginia, I wondered if God were to restore those old, dry bones in Williamsburg to life anew, what would those people do? Would they praise God and go home to live with their descendants in accord with people of all colors, people of all genders, and people of all walks of life? Or, would those reanimated Williamsburg bones pick up rifles and resume the battle at which their bodies had met their physical death?

I fear maybe the latter outcome, since the battle those soldiers were fighting is still going on today. (Isn't it?) Our weapons have changed: social media and congressional hearings, incarceration and police-baiting, theft of services and immigration rhetoric... I could go on, but you know as well as I what “weapons” we use against others, what drains us of hope today.

What we need, after we take hope from God reanimating our dry-bones life, is to read the rest of Ezekiel. In chapters 38 and 39, the next two chapters after today's lesson, the

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prophet shares God's vision for the nations. In these visions, God defeats evil among the nations, which is to say God defeats the violent nations, the nations that obtain power by rebelling against God.

How will God defeat violent nations? According to Ezekiel, by earthquakes and floods and fire and death. Does any of this sound FAMILIAR today?

Once evil is finally dealt with, chapters 40-48 of Ezekiel foretell of future hope for all creation. For Ezekiel's people, this future hope would be achieved by a new Temple in Jerusalem and by God's renewed presence there—the symbols of hope for a new creation where we humans choose every day to live in right-relationship with God and our neighbors.

For those at Church of the Resurrection today, are we taking hope that OUR exile is over, and OUR temple rebuilt?

That's the lesson today: God has done God's part; God is doing God's part; and God will do God's part. No matter how hopeless things seem, new life is always possible. WE can't restore ourselves to health and new life; that's up to God, who always is willing to renew his covenant with us. What we DO with our restored old bones is up to us. How will we use our newly reanimated bones that God has given us?