

ENCHANTED

Ezek. 37:1-10 / Jn. 11:38-44

“Can these dry bones live?” God wants to know from the prophet Ezekiel. By now, our feet may have accumulated a crust of dust on our fifth week of our Lenten journey. Perhaps our hearts have become somewhat dusty, too. “Can our dry bones live?” may very well be one of the pressing questions of our day as we find ourselves in good company with Ezekiel—our bones bleached dry by an age filled with perils, uncertainty, lies, violence, illness, relational issues, banking crises, and doubt.

As she is beginning to emerge from the trauma of the Covid pandemic, the British author Katherine May, a contemporary secular mystic and prophetess, writes in her new book *Enchanted*: “We are, all of us, charred remains, nothing left of us but blackened bones.” May discovered in her thirties that she was autistic. Until then, she never had a clue. As she now struggles with the blackened bones of a lost life narrative, she attempts to regain some of her childhood memories. Her search in her own valley of dry bones leads her to this conclusion: “Childhood used to have dirt under the fingernails. Now it has hand sanitizer.” In other words, a world of childlike wonder and exploration gave way to an “adult” world where enchantment has become a nuisance rather than a source of energy and life.

Like May, the ancient prophet Ezekiel also deals with bones, but his are bleached dry instead of blackened. Same difference. In our Hebrew text today, God encourages Ezekiel to prophesy to the “bones” in his life and assures him that God will make them live once again. However, God will not make them live without the help of the prophet who must encourage the bones to live, and the bones must want to live. Only then will the God who made heaven and earth breathe divine breath and life into them once again. God cannot resurrect Ezekiel’s bones if they do not want to be resurrected.

May encourages her readers to do the same. In order to regain new breath, she beseeches them to search for the lost wonder of their childhood in order to enliven their desiccated spirits. In her case, she finds enchantment in her memories: How her grandmother used to peel an orange every afternoon, just for the sheer pleasure of it. Or how she felt when she took a

walk in the woods when she was little, and now feels when she walks there with her son Bertie.

But how can her dry bones live again after they have been charred by the traumas of her autism diagnosis right before she was thrust into Covid isolation? I am sure all of us know something about “dry bones.” Some of our bones may literally have become brittle or arthritic with advancing age. Some of the other bones may have dried out allegorically—a marriage gone stale; a friendship broken; a career having crossed its apex ... and now what; a life taking an unexpected and unplanned turn. Whatever narrative has been upended in our lives, each of us knows something about “dry bones,” each of us has faced the question at some point: “Can I find life again? Joy again? Purpose again? Health again? Love again?”

In her book, May employs the metaphor of swimming to this foundational question. She used to love to swim in the open waters of the Atlantic Ocean before her isolation began. Now, being able to do this again post-Covid, she found she had forgotten how. So, she decided to take swimming lessons. Fancying herself an expert swimmer, her instructor got her to accept that she really wasn't and that she had to unlearn her technique in order to become the expert which existed in her mind ... but in a completely, unexpected and different way. Letting go of her “old swimmer self,” she experienced a “resurrection” into a new, even more beautiful way of experiencing her life as an athlete. She found out that her dry bones could live, and swim again.

“Can our dry bones live?” This is also a crucial question on our Lenten journey with Jesus to Jerusalem as our feet get heavier and heavier, knowing what lies ahead—both for Jesus and for us. I usually ask our confirmands what it is in their lives that gives them real joy. The kind of feeling they had when they were little, when life was full of wonder, and they didn't have a care, responsibility, or obligation in the world. “That's the place where God meets you and loves you as the person God created you to be,” I tell them. “Can our dry bones live?” Of course, they can. But God cannot resurrect them if we do not want them to be resurrected.

We find the same challenge Ezekiel faced, and we face, in the story of Jesus and Lazarus. Jesus calls his dead friend forth from his tomb, but he cannot go anywhere because he is still wrapped in his grave clothes. “Unbind him and let him go!” Jesus says to Lazarus's friends and the community gathered at his tomb. They need to unbind him—otherwise Jesus's miracle of resurrecting the dead is not going to be made manifest.

Walter Brueggemann, a native Missourian, graduate of Eden Seminary and erudite scholar of the Hebrew Scriptures, calls this dilemma “the prophetic imagination.” According to Brueggemann, this is a twofold process. First, we need to develop what he calls a “language of grief.” In other words, we need to ask ourselves what it is that binds us, what bleaches and dries out our bones, and we need to acknowledge that. And then, we need to let it go. Only then, he says, can we develop a “language of amazement.” Only then can we ask God for God’s breath to enter us and give us new life. But we must want it.

Katherine May, again, is very instructive and helpful here. She says we must enter “deep terrain” in order to address the “deep trauma” we suffered. For her, “deep terrain” is the forest with all its majesty and mystery. It is a place which looks different every time she enters because it is multilayered beyond our fathoming. Both our grief and our amazement are like that. Too multilayered to fathom, too vast for answers. All we can hope for when we enter “deep terrain”—a forest, mountains, the ocean, the bible, life with the risen Christ—is an ever deeper understanding of our own life in the face of mystery. If we expect answers rather than engaging the mystery, we will be sorely disappointed because there aren’t any.

As is often the case, our poets can help us when we are at a loss for words and as we begin to collect our dry bones, unbind that which holds us back, and dip our toes into new, resurrected life. The 19th century poet William Wordsworth has this to say:

“There was a time when meadow, grove and stream
The earth and every common sight,
To me did seem
Appareled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;
Turn whereso’er I may
By night or day
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.”

Wordsworth cannot see the former things anymore. They have passed away. But he can see new things, unexpected things, and experience new life in a way he could never have imagined until he could acknowledge that the past can never be retrieved. Wordsworth is now “unbound,” he is set free. He is “resurrected.”

“Can our dry bones live?” Of course they can. But we must want them to live. And if we do, the God of heaven and earth, who brought back our Lord Jesus from the dead, can accomplish wonders beyond all we can dream or hope. God is the one who turns our grief into enchantment, our lament into amazement, and our sorrow into joy.

May it be so. For you, and for me. Amen.

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