

*Sermon for 5 Lent, Year A
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
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Our Old Testament lesson this morning is yet another passage that is so familiar we no longer hear it. The valley of dry bones. Think about the vision for a minute with me. Imagine yourself having this vision. Let's say you're in an IMAX theater, and all you see is a great plain or valley with human bones covering the surface of the ground. All you hear is the lonely wind blowing over the plain. And all you smell is the dry dust kicked up by the wind. That's creepy. Basically, you're surrounded by death.

The bones represent "the whole house of Israel", the people of God. They have disobeyed their God and are separated from the blessing that he promised to their fathers for so long. But they are also a symbol for our church, and our country, and the world we live in; all lost in rebellion and separation from the God of love and life.

We need to get used to the idea that we live in the midst of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. We live in a vast empty waste amongst the scattered skeletal fragments of humanity, and death is all around us every day. We are surrounded by the wasted partial remains of human beings in our families, our society, our nation, our world, our church. Many of us have friends and family, people we desperately love, who are part of the pile of bones. Even we ourselves have some death still about us. We are rather parched, and our sinews are not all remade yet.

And God asks us, "Can these bones live?" Only you know, Lord God, because only you can do it. You see the dry desert wind that seems to be driving the dust into your nostrils is also the breath of life and the Holy Spirit. Even in the macabre setting of the valley of bones, even in the horror of that absolute death, the Lord is not absent. The Hebrew word, *rûah*, is used throughout this passage. It means all of those things: breath, wind, spirit. There is a constant wordplay on all of these things. To the disobedient, the presence of God may not seem pleasant. But the Lord never, ever abandons us to death until he finally allows us the freedom to choose eternal damnation. Believe me, if you're still here, there's still hope.

But there is also a decision to make, for us and for everyone else in the world. And that decision is very simple. Not easy, but simple. You see, there are only two choices, ultimately. St. Paul lays out the options for us in his letter to the Romans. “Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” So there you are. You can sell yourself as a slave to the passions and unholy desires that continually bubble up inside each one of us. Or you can give yourself over to obedience, and give up your cherished right to rebellion against the one who is righteousness. There are no other choices.

Those who love and obey sin certainly have freedom from the authority of God. They are also free from life itself. For the wage that sin pays for faithful service is death. And when we serve sin, we add our naked, parched bones to the subhuman refuse littering this valley of death. When sin reigns in our lives, we are dead. It takes not only the power of God but the very life of God himself to return us to life again.

And so Jesus comes to give us this life. And in our Gospel today, he goes head to head with death. It is not enough that he deals with the symptoms of death, like disease. It is sin and death that he has come to combat. So he waits until Lazarus is good and dead, and then he tells the disciples, “for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe.” It is not enough that people know he could have *prevented* Lazarus’ death. They must know that he is life itself. “I am the resurrection and the life; he who trusts in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and trusts in me shall never die.”

Jesus is beyond the Jordan, because the Jews in Jerusalem have threatened to stone him to death. But his time has finally come. He who is life itself comes to this place of death and challenges battle. “Deeply moved ... and troubled” is a simpering excuse for a translation here. When he saw them all weeping over the death of Lazarus, he was angry. “He was riled in his spirit and stirred himself up” is closer to the mark. His weeping isn’t the emotional overflow of a “sensitive” guy. It’s the manly response to the obscenity of death and the violation of God’s order in the world.

When Jesus comes to the tomb, he tells them to take away the stone and calls Lazarus out of the tomb. And Lazarus obeys and comes out. Of course, the final victory wasn’t won for Lazarus that day. Jesus has shown that he is life, come to combat death. But presumably Lazarus had to die again at some point. And Jesus then had to go to the cross and his own tomb, and finally be raised himself in order to conquer sin and death. But even then the story isn’t over.

Remember that we all live in the midst of a vast tomb. We are all Lazarus. We all lie in a tomb among dry bones, slaves to sin and death. And our Lord calls us to come out. He has broken the chains of our former master sin, and cut off the power of death. But we cannot be our own masters. We must choose whose slaves we will be. If we choose Jesus, then he promises us holiness, righteousness, and life. Not just endless physical life, but the kind of life that cannot be anything but eternal. Instead of being free *from* God, we will be free *to* truly live.

We find ourselves back where we began, in the valley of dry bones. And remember we have a choice to make. Either we are bones, free from God and slaves to sin, desiring and remaining in death; or we are the prophet, binding our wills to the will of God, and waiting for the Spirit of God to breathe new life into ourselves and the wasted world of death around us.

As Lazarus lies in his tomb and hears the command of the Lord, he has a choice. “Lazarus, come out.” But will he? Will he indenture himself to the Lord and abandon himself to obedience? Or will he simply refuse? “Oh thank you, Jesus, but I’m much more comfortable here. It’s quiet and peaceful, even though I’m here with a bunch of old bones.”

Come out. You must choose. And it is only after the choice to obey that Jesus says, “Unbind him, and let him go.” But if we choose to obey, if we are set free to live in the spirit of God, then we can also look forward to joining with the great army that God is redeeming for himself from the valley of dry bones. God will not abandon his people to sin and death. And we have the great honor of letting them know that, whether they like it or not. Some of them will choose obedience and true freedom with us. And the spirit will return them to life.