

A Rattling  
 Reading from the New Testament: Romans 8:11  
 Reading from the Old Testament: Ezekiel 37:1-14

In 597 BCE, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon laid siege on Jerusalem, and as bounty of his conquest, rounded up the royal family, the Rotary Club, the Chamber of Commerce, the Junior League, Arts Council, and Carpenter's Union, taking them all back to Babylon, thus giving himself a pretty impressive bullpen of talent while also draining Judah of the faculty to rebuild and resist. These exiles landed in what is now Iraq near the Chebar River in a settlement called Tel Abib. If that sounds familiar, it should. The modern Israeli capitol, Tel Aviv, founded in 1909, was named after Tel Abib, memorializing this story and Israel's exile experience.

There would be other deportations to come, but in that first group of exiles was a priest named Ezekiel, who after a few years in Babylon was singled out by the Lord to serve as a prophet. The call came to Ezekiel in the form of one wacky vision that included tricked out wheels within wheels that gleamed like emeralds and had the equivalent of 24-inch rims covered with eyeballs, putting the little rearview camera on my Volkswagen to shame. And I thought park assist was a new thing!

The vision was so unsettling that once it ended, Ezekiel sat stunned for 7 days right there in the middle of Tel Abib. The dude was freaked out. Well, the otherworldly visions and bizarre instructions, that resulted in equally bizarre behaviors, probably led his peers to view Ezekiel as eccentric, or quirky, or just flat out freakish. And they kept coming – Ezekiel is eating books; giving himself a haircut with a sharp sword; clapping his hands and stomping his feet while riffing a rap on all the sins of Israel; he’s even faking a nervous breakdown during breakfast like some performance artist in the public square. There are strange creatures; funky vehicles flying all around; and a giant eagle putting on his John Deere hat and becoming a farmer. After reading Ezekiel for a while, you can’t help but start thinking this guy’s been to a few too many Grateful Dead concerts.

So, by the time we get to chapter 37 with its valley of dry bones, it almost seems tame by comparison; and yet, for all the bizarro world imagery in Ezekiel, there are critical insights from the prophet that speak powerfully to a time such as this and a people like us. Now, Ezekiel is speaking to exiles who have been extracted from their homes, their communities, their temple, their livelihoods, their neighbors, and

popped down in an unfamiliar foreign land where their ATM cards don't work, the grocery stores don't sell what are staples for them, and all the locals look at them with suspicion, as if the exiles, refugees, or foreigners are carrying the virus, bringing unwanted elements into their communities and traditions, using up all their resources, clogging up all their services, and thus being derided by the locals as if there's not enough to share. You think they had a toilet paper shortage?

Being an exile in a foreign land is to be confronted and victimized by the myth of scarcity. We're seeing a bit of that now here in the land of abundance as we come upon shelves emptied by avarice induced through the misconceived paranoia that there is not enough to share.

Yes, Ezekiel is speaking to exiles, but we are learning that you don't have to be banished to a foreign land to experience exile. I saw a meme this week that said, "I'm still deciding what to wear to my living room couch on New Year's Eve." Exiled in our own homes, we're feeling the creep of insecurity – health insecurity, job insecurity, living space insecurity, relationship insecurity, debt insecurity, education insecurity, graduation insecurity, leadership insecurity, investment insecurity, Lysol insecurity. We are exiles from routines, family, friends,

Smashburger, March Madness, sanctuaries. We are exiles from a way of life, exiles from hope or a future. The Israelites had reached a point where they wondered whether they had been exiled from God. Life as they knew it, lived it, was over. Even if they returned to Israel, they knew that life would be different. The old life is gone, but what will the new life look like if there even is one?

“Mortal, can these bones live?” I don’t know about you, but I’m reaching the age where that is a question that confronts me every morning when the alarm goes off. Mortal, can these bones live? The Lord’s question to Ezekiel speaks to any situation where there is loss, brokenness, desolation, dislocation, trauma, actual or emotional bankruptcy, disease, or despair. Mortal, can these bones live?

In his vision, Ezekiel finds himself in a valley, standing amidst a field littered with dry bones. I read one account seeing this as through a Mathew Brady daguerreotype photograph of a Civil War battlefield, the disfigured dead strewn about like eviscerated stuffed animals and broken toys on a playroom floor, the breath of life vanquished.

In the Bergamo region of Italy, the New York Times reports that the low estimate of coronavirus deaths having already occurred is well over 1300 (The death toll in Italy has already exceeded 10,000 and still climbing.) The deaths have been so numerous in Bergamo that the local paper only contains obituaries.

“At 7:30 a.m. one morning, a crew of three Red Cross volunteers met to make sure the ambulance was certified as cleaned and stocked with oxygen. Like masks and gloves, the tanks had become an increasingly rare resource. They blasted one another in sprays of alcohol disinfectants. They sanitized their cellphones.

“We can’t be the untori,’ said Nadia Vallati, 41, a Red Cross volunteer, whose day job is working in the city’s tax office. She was referring to the infamous “anointers,” suspected in Italian lore of spreading contagion during the 17th century plague.”

“On a Saturday, Ms. Vallati found herself in the bedroom of a 90-year-old man. She asked his two granddaughters if he had had any contact with anyone who had the coronavirus. Yes, they said, the man’s

son, their father, who had died on Wednesday. Their grandmother, they told her, had been taken away on Friday and was in critical condition.

They weren't crying, she said, because 'they didn't have any tears left.'" (Jason Horowitz, *New York Times*)

The children in our own community are encountering fears that parents were never prepared to interpret. Numbers rise, denying our wish that the curve not only flatten but descend like a coaster at Carowinds. With Israel's exiles the world laments, "Our bones are dried up and we are cut off completely."

Mortal, can these bones live? Though Ezekiel hasn't a clue, the Inquirer knows the answer, and soon we hear the rattling of bones. There is a wind blowing, but not just the wind that blows the dried leaves of winter into your garage, your doorways, your gutters. No, this wind brings life where there is death, hope where there is despair. Bones come together, flesh appears upon them, and the fallen stand. The Lord says to Israel and all who suffer, I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back ... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

Even now, as the corona curve continues its ascendancy, you can hear the rattling of bones. Some cities are halting evictions and utility cut-offs, and where personal social networks have collapsed, new ones are rising and stepping in. Friday, the Observer described the fresh connection between 20-year-old Liam Eklind of NYC, and Carol Sterling, an 83-year-old retired arts administrator who has been sheltering at home during the coronavirus outbreak, unable to shop for herself. Yearning for some fresh food, she found Liam through their synagogue, and soon he showed up at her door with a bag full of salad fixings and oranges.

Elkind and a friend, Simone Policano, amassed 1,300 volunteers in 72 hours to deliver groceries and medicine to older New Yorkers and other vulnerable people. They call themselves Invisible Hands, and they do something else in the process – provide human contact and comfort, at a safe distance, of course.” Elkind and his fellow volunteers take the name of their project from their vigilance in maintaining social distance from the people they serve, and their meticulous efforts to avoid community spread while shopping and delivering.

The article observes this as “a moment of ‘tikkun olam’ between the two congregants of the progressive and service-minded Stephen Wise Free Synagogue. The Hebrew for “world repair” is a phrase synonymous with the notion of social action. “It’s neighbor to neighbor,” Sterling said. “A crisis like this often brings out the very best.” (*AP - Lianne Italie, Jessie Wardarski*)

We are understandably preoccupied by the question of how our lives will be changed by this. Yet, the answer to that question will depend to a great extent on how our character is altered by this. Will our hearts become more malleable to mercy? Will our eyes perceive some good in those who stand across the bottomless chasm of our political divide? Will our minds continue to foster new ways to connect with and show concern for one another?

This week, columnist David Brooks penned an observation that I realized has been central to an angst I have felt for the past few years. He observed that we are a *morally inarticulate culture*. That’s the phrase I’ve been searching for to describe what my admittedly unimaginative eyes have perceived for some time. It’s not that we as a people are immoral or even amoral. We just haven’t done the work to



even learn the faith vocabulary that would form for us a moral center. I read an article in *The Economist* this week about a growing trend through which individuals engage the art of relationship coupling through the use of business management skills, using profit ideologies, spreadsheets, and what I would call the illusion of rational thought to maximize the benefit they derive from a relationship. I was so disheartened because it was so sterile, utilitarian, soulless, and ultimately selfish. Written before this Covid crisis, I can't help but wonder how such relationship arrangements weather it. If there is no moral center and vocabulary to drive behavior, we just wind up using one another and fail to understand the essence of love.

Maybe that is why I was so encouraged by the connection made between Liam and Carol – **Through. Their. Synagogue.** Their faith. Brooks points to Viktor Frankl, who, “writing from the madness of the Holocaust, reminded us that we don't get to choose our difficulties, but we do have the freedom to select our responses. Meaning, he argued, comes from three things: the work we offer in times of crisis, the love we give, and our ability to display courage in the face of suffering. The

menace may be subhuman or superhuman, but we all have the option of asserting our own dignity, even to the end.” (David Brooks, *New York Times*)

There are bones rattling out there through the life-giving breath of the Spirit of God. Important fundamental questions are finally being asked now about our responsibility for our neighbor. A Red Cross volunteer sprays herself with disinfectant before taking a tank of oxygen to a man struggling to breathe; a college student pays meticulous attention to safely shop for the vulnerable, sparking a movement that is spreading across the land; children in our congregation are writing notes to cross-generational pen pals to maintain the ties that bind us here.

At this moment, one of our elders along with other CMS volunteers is working feverishly packing bags of food in our parking lot for families in the area affected by the crisis, and another member who is a dedicated volunteer at Loaves and Fishes has been providing counsel to this effort today, to help it run efficiently and safely. Phone calls are being made. Errands are being run. People are Zooming into new friendships through the wizardry of the web.

Brooks sees a new introspection coming into the world, as well.

“Everybody I talk to these days seems eager to have deeper conversations and ask more fundamental questions.” There is a way through this, a path that is as old as Abraham and as radical as Jesus.

Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk around, so let us listen for the word of the Lord who said, “I will bring you back ... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” Amen.