

## Ezekiel – Hope When There is None

I can pretty much never read this passage with out thinking of the song Dem Bones. I sort of vaguely knew it was originally a spiritual, but mostly I thought of it as a kids' song. Toe bone's connected to the foot bone...foot bone's connected to the ankle bone...and so on.

But its history is fascinating.

The original is an African American spiritual. Most African American spirituals are songs of hope in hopeless times. Many of them came from the slave settlements on Southern plantations. They were mostly drawn straight from Bible passages. To those slaves, they were songs, not relegated to a dusty past, but songs of present hope...songs of freedom.

References to the promised land weren't just about Israel. And references to crossing the Jordan into the Promised Land weren't just about the Jordan River.

The other side of the Jordan, the Promised Land of freedom, came to mean freedom in the north. And the Jordan River was a stand in for the Ohio River which divided the Confederacy from the Union, slavery from freedom.

And those references in the spirituals weren't just wishful thinking – the spirituals were songs of resistance. Sometimes they were even literally sung as a coded message to signal movement on the underground railroad.

The spirituals were songs of hope for a people whom it would seem had no reason to hope.

Dem Bones however was not written during slavery. It was written in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by James Weldon Johnson and J. Rosamond Johnson. You might recognize them as the lyricist and composer of the hymn Lift Every Voice and Sing.

Of course, by the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, slavery had ended, at least in the strictly legal sense. But intense white rage at emancipation and reconstruction brought a vicious backlash against blacks that lasted well into the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

The Ku Klux Klan ballooned in membership during the 20's. The horrifically racist movie, Birth of a Nation, came out in 1915. Blacks lived in mortal fear of lynchings. The only 20<sup>th</sup> Century lynching to happen in Nebraska happened in the 1919 race riot in Omaha. For the record, the rioters were the white people. Freedom to vote was largely non-existent in the south, despite the constitution. Share cropping and convict leasing meant slavery really didn't go away.

It's in that setting that the Johnson brothers penned the spiritual about Ezekiel and Dem Dry Bones.

For a people whose hope brightened with the end of the Civil War, the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> amendments, and Reconstruction, the years after all but dashed that hope.

Their hope was dried up like those dried up bones, lying in a hot, rocky desert with no life in them. But hope is a funny thing. Even the faintest hope can keep people going. And when God speaks words of hope, even the dead can come to life.

Hope where there is no hope is what this passage is all about.

Ezekiel was a prophet before and during the Babylonian exile. He was a priest living in a refugee camp alongside a river in Babylon with other exiles.

His prophecies came from a series of visions, including this one.

As the passage says, the bones represent Israel. It's hard to imagine a more hopeless image...bones of the slaughtered, lying in a mass grave in the wilderness. The bones have been picked over by scavengers and bleached by the sun. There is absolutely no life in them.

It's a pretty good image of how hopeless things seemed to the Israelites who are being held captive in Babylon. As far as they were concerned, as a people...a nation...they were dead.

Maybe you can imagine how Ezekiel felt standing there, looking out over the bones...hopeless. O Mortal, Can these bones live God asks? As Ezekiel looked out over the deathly scene, dried up bones baking in the sun, his first thought had to have been, um...no.

But Ezekiel spoke to the bones anyway...

And the bones started rattling...tendons and ligaments grew to hold them together. Then muscles, skin, internal organs.

Then, at God's word, Ezekiel called to the four winds and breath filled the bodies. And they lived.

Into the most hopeless situation imaginable...God spoke and God acted. God brought the dead to life.

Like all of the prophetic writings, there are layers to this.

Christians too often jump to our own physical death and believe this points to resurrection from the dead...what happens after we die.

But that isn't all it is...nothing about the salvation story is only about that. It's also about the times God brings hope and new life into situations that appear completely hopeless, while we're still technically alive.

To see the layers means looking back through history and paying attention to how God has acted.

For Israel, it was the hope that those dead, dry bones would once again walk in the Promised Land...that God would bring them home and restore them as a people. After 70 years, that promise did come true. The next empire to arise in the Middle East was Persia. Persia's King Cyrus set the exiles free to return home and rebuild.

The bones did recover sinew, muscles, skin. The breath of new life flowed into their lungs and they once again breathed in their own land.

But there are other times through history as well.

Take, for example, those enslaved African descent people, singing those spirituals...singing songs of freedom and hope as they toiled under a situation that seemed hopeless. It took way longer than 70 years, but they were brought to freedom. God brought hope and new life after centuries of no hope.

God brings the dead to life and hope to the hopeless.

And what about Black Americans in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, singing and tapping along with Dem Bones Dem Bones Dem dry bones? I believe God acted, and is still acting, there too. The Civil Rights era exploded on the scene and a new prophet spoke words of freedom and hope. God spoke, and continues to speak, hope and bring new life into all death-dealing systems of oppression and injustice.

Maybe you can think of times in your life, either personally or in the world, where things seemed pretty hopeless. Wherever there are people living in captivity...whether to other people or to their own addictions and sins...wherever people are living in desperation, God raises prophets to speak into that hopelessness...to speak words of liberation, hope, and life.

Often at those most hopeless of times...when we have no more defenses, no options, no plan, when we are as dried up as those bones Ezekiel saw, we can only turn helplessly to God. We are forced to give up control, and simply trust the God who brings the dead to life, a way out of no way, and hope out of no hope.

And yes, ultimately, even our physical death isn't the end. Because this text does ultimately point beyond Israel, beyond all human action and human history. It points to another time when hope seemed lost.

As Jesus' disciples watched helplessly while their teacher and friend slowly died on a cross, all the hopes they pinned on Jesus died with him...until God brought Jesus back to life and gave the disciples new hope.

Because that's what God does...God brings the dead to life and hope to the hopeless.