

The Marvelous Bones of the Real

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The Rev. Scott Walters

I'm not sure that there's a better word in English than *bone*. Would you agree? It's so sturdy it can't even be killed by our idioms and our cliches. Soaked to the bone, close to the bone, cut to the bone. Bone of contention or making no bones about it. Bone dry, bone tired, bone cold. The phrases all still work, don't they? When our daughter Kate was maybe seven she claimed to hear something in her bones. And we believed her. Like few words in our language, *bone* rings of what's real, doesn't it?

But the ring comes from someplace much older than English. In the psalms of Morning Prayer just this week, we read, "He put on cursing like a garment, let it soak into his body like water and into his bones like oil." I'll be staying at least six feet from him. And also, "Because of the voice of my groaning I am but skin and bones." Now this is astonishing. "Skin and bones" has held up to regular use for at least 2500 years and the long trip from ancient Hebrew to the English we speak every day. How can this be?

Well, I didn't bother to get any expert opinion on the matter, so I'm afraid you're left with mine. Bones are structure, and bones are remnants. Bones are what hold our bodies up. And bones are what remain when the rest of us has gone the way of the things of earth. The whole of life and death is shut up, like Jeremiah's fire, in our bones. And so, any story about bones, no matter how fabulous, will have a hard time floating entirely up and away from the real.

And so, when Ezekiel says, "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones..." we're right with him. Across all these centuries, before we know what the vision means, we've had it. It is a vivid metaphor in time and three dimensions about the way things were. We can feel Israel's hopelessness. The dryness of being cut off from their homes and their lives as they'd known them before their exile. After all, separated bones are dead bones. Always.

But the vision is of a resurrection. A resuscitation, really. The movie reel seems to run in reverse, with the sound turned very much on. Bones are rattling audibly back together. Flesh and muscle and skin return. And then it's all filled up again with the living breath of God. What's decomposed is being re-composed, if you will.

It's unbelievable. And the unbelievableness of the prophecy was maybe meant to encourage a people who'd grown weary of believing. It's what we want when times are bad, isn't it? A sign. A miracle. Something out of the ordinary when the ordinary is awful. We want a clean break or a complete reversal in the way things are.

But the wild vision of bones growing back into bodies was not how Israel was going to be restored. It was a gift to their imaginations that maybe was meant first to return them to the ordinary miracle of their lives before they get back to Canaan.

Because Ezekiel was really pointing his people to the source of life itself. Not a superhero god who can help your nation conquer the world and get the best homeland ever, although the Israelites had a hard time letting go of this fantasy, bless their hearts. What our Hebrew forbears showed us over and over again in scripture, is that not much of life actually happens in the Promised Land.

Ezekiel's prophecy was about the return from exile. But unless Israel's faith was restored in the God who had already filled their bones with marrow, who had already sent breath into their bodies, nothing would change. Our lives, you see, are miracles already. If we can't see this, we won't be any better off in any Promised Land. We'll just come apart and dry up again in all the familiar ways in a new setting. Read the stories and see.

It may be a shorter jump than it's ever been for many of us into the bleak world of Ezekiel. Frankly, it's a little scary to be cooped up in a body right now, with a virus we still don't fully understand and is a long way from being controlled.

But even more disconcerting than the biology, perhaps, is the way the ordinary patterns and structures of our lives have come apart. We can't go to work, some of us because the work is no longer there. We can't gather for meals, or welcome people into our homes, or go to church. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely," doesn't sound like somebody else's lament these days.

But there is grace in the midst of this moment, too. Because when so much of what we believed makes the world real and gives it meaning ground to a sudden halt, we found ourselves still here. Still capable of love and, not only longing for connection, but finding it by whatever means we have.

The other day I was sitting on my front porch. Two guys rode by on bicycles, and one was saying, "Dude, it's like the 1950s out here. People are walking on the sidewalks and talking to their neighbors. It's wild!"

That's not the whole story of the 1950s, I'm told. But he was onto something. I realize that mine is a perspective of great privilege. I do still have a job, even if most of it seems to happen on Zoom and Facebook, right now.

This is a time of legitimate fear, real loneliness, vulnerability, and material need for many people in our world. Remember that even the directive to shelter at home assumes one has a home in which to shelter.

But it's also true that in this deep disruption of our lives we have an opportunity. And we do well to remember that nearly all of our holy scriptures were written for and to and by people who were displaced or on the margins. Not the ones who were settled and in control. And what scripture continuously calls us back to is the essentials: our relationships with God and with one another. Ezekiel wasn't only telling Israel that God was going to bring them back to life someday. He was also turning their attention and ours to the God who binds the miracle of our lives together today.

It strikes me that what's different about the present crisis is that, while markets may be reeling, what worries us most deeply is that people, flesh and bone people, are not able to contribute their part to our common life. The images of actual lives being cut off from each other is even more vivid than plummeting market returns. And, frightening as it is, this may also be drawing us back toward the truth that schoolchildren and line cooks and electricians and receptionists and nurses and shopkeepers are more real and more essential than the S&P 500. They existed before it did and they will exist long after it's gone. Their lives are the true, incarnate miracles, even if the market reverses and spins off toward eternity tomorrow.

Our opportunity is to return to something we really do know in our bones. Which is that these lives of ours are fleeting but they are real and precious gifts from a God who is loving and good. And so are the lives of our neighbors. Not after the return from this exile. Not post recovery. Right now. Today. In the flesh. We're the miracle, friends.

Seamus Heaney must have meant something like this when he wrote of a wise and fabulous old legend:

The annals say: when the monks of Clonmacnoise
Were all at prayers inside the oratory
A ship appeared above them in the air.

The anchor dragged along behind so deep
It hooked itself into the altar rails
And then, as the big hull rocked to a standstill,

A crewman shinned and grappled down the rope
And struggled to release it. But in vain.
'This man can't bear our life here and will drown,'

The abbot said, 'unless we help him.' So
They did, the freed ship sailed, and the man climbed back
Out of the marvellous as he had known it.

The marvelous, you see, is not off in some magical flying ship. But down here at this ordinary end of the rope where we live. And it has always been so.

Our bones may feel a little dry in this time of separation, but look around and take note also of the human refusal to stay disconnected. Look at the kind social media posts and Christmas decorations on lawns and sidewalk conversations from six feet away, which may be a fraction of the distance neighbors have lived at for years. Gifts left on porches, telephone calls to shut ins, meals still served to the hungry in Calvary's alley at a loving distance. This is the marvelous as we have known it.

And look at what's happening right here, right now. Morning Prayer with nine of us in the Calvary chancel and hundreds of you at your phones and laptops, participating in this ancient office of prayer with the tools we happen to have at our disposal today, because we matter to each other. Call it a bare bones liturgy if you like. But it is a liturgy in praise of the God who is raising these bones up into a body even as we speak.

I hope these prayers ring of what's real to you, as they do to me. Ring in the deepest parts of yourself. The place where you carry your worries and your wounds, your joys and your loves. The place where you know you are needy and reach out to God and to others instinctively for connection.

And I hope that, as so much of what's familiar has fallen away for a time, your attention has returned to what is truly most marvelous in our lives. To the God who has already filled our bones with marrow and has already breathed life into our bodies and has already given us the blessed need for connection, like a bone to its bone, with all God's other children as well.