

4-2-17 “Dem Dry Bones vs. Our God” A Reflection on Ezekiel 37:1-14 by Mark L. Arbisi, Christ Church, Kennebunk

Once upon a time there was a word. It was a good word as words go. It was a word that people rallied behind, a word people would embrace with abandonment. That word is “gay,” as in “have a gay-O-time.” My maternal Grandmother came of age during the Roaring Twenties, when “gay times” were all the rage. “Gay” as I’m sure you realize meant “carefree,” “happy” or “bright and showy.” In her old age she would speak of how much the times have changed. What once was broadly and innocently appealing passed away. “It was once such a wonderful word.” she would lament. As the Bible students among us know very well, “*there is a time for every season under heaven.*” Today of course, for the majority of us, the quest for gay-O-times don’t quite have the same broad appeal it once did for some reason.

“Liberalism” is another such word. And at the moment I’m speaking of liberal theology not politics, although the same affect has certainly taken its toll on liberal politics. After a very long run, at some point the season of liberal theology all but dried up. In its place we’re likely to hear “progressive” or “inclusive,” which speaks to an evolution in Protestant theology yes, but are words that are not properly interchangeable with “liberal.” Liberal theology grew out of the Enlightenment, and has been a significant theological movement from the 18th century through the first half of the twentieth century. As you know or would imagine, liberal theology began a steady decline roughly around 1960, which has proven to be a radical hinge moment in Church History.

Just for you I googled “liberal theology” in order to offer you an informed description. The following caught my ear. It was written by a Church Historian who after researching this period published a book on the subject: “*Liberal theology is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially the natural and social sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience...and its commitment to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to modern people*” (Gary Dorrien). The key phrase might be this “commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience,” which is inseparable from the wider Enlightenment Movement that emphasized reason and individualism over and above tradition.

In Churches this very simply meant, “Think for yourself...don’t take the Clergy’s word for it,” and it was extremely revolutionary at the time (Don’t let anyone tell you that theology doesn’t matter). But, times they have a changed. Liberalism ran its course. It had a noble, virtuous and honorable life empowering people. But now, in today’s world of false news, we’re experiencing the painful effect of too much emphasis on individualism. Now we understand the troubling downside, indeed the real risks and dangers that are even gnawing away at the very foundations of our democracy and which are a result of pushing tradition off the table and placing much too much importance on empowering individual thought and expression (so recklessly easy in this internet age). The pendulum has indeed swung sharply, from blind obedience to blind recklessness. Welcome to the 21st century.

Ok, enough talk about history and how we ended up in the world we’re living in today. The point is, things change, and how. To everything there is an ebb and a tide, a life and a death. But then for us who identify ourselves as Easter people, we possess a die-hard, stubborn, ever-optimistic trust in something called Resurrection—in hope beyond reasonable hope, in life beyond ordinary life, in optimism beyond present cynicism and despair. It’s a truly wondrous thing, this gift, this

blessing, this faith of ours! We're well aware of how it keeps us upright and moving forward on days when we might be inclined to entertain alternatives. Where one day our existence is experienced as dry and empty of life, we Easter people continue to persevere because we know, because we understand, that with God there is always a tomorrow, always more than we can presently behold, more to life than we can conceive. Among all that Easter is and all that we imagine Easter might be, it is certainly that.

Our remarkable lesson from Ezekiel—a field of dry, very, very, very dry bones, becoming fully vitalized and reanimated—is not to be confused with Resurrection, but it clearly illustrates the basis of our Resurrection faith—hope beyond hope, life beyond life, optimism beyond despair. Sometimes death really isn't a dead-end, sometimes God really isn't finished with dem dry bones, sometimes God really hasn't gone missing from what appears inevitable, sometimes God really isn't finished with what the majority have lost faith in.

Now to clear up any residue confusion, the point of our lesson today is infinitely more profound a matter than bones reconnecting to bones, as the African spiritual has us all humming: *“toe bone connected to the foot bone, foot bone connected to the heel bone, heel bone connected to the ankle bone”*...which continues upward through the skeleton until... *“the neck bone connects to the head bone...[presto] dem bones, dem bones gonna rise again. Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around. Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around. Now hear the Word of the the Lord.”*

Sometimes things come full circle. Sometimes an itinerant Nazarene's unorthodox ministry returns to life as the Christ of God's ministry; sometimes a disperse and scattered remnant of once actively faithful people—in the case of our lesson, the Israelites—actually, as they did, return to the land, return home, rise again as powerful witnesses to God's presence and power in the world. And yes, sometimes passé definitions and has-been theologies, even declining religions come full circle. As a commentator reminds us: “They used to be skeletons, but they are past that stage now.” Only with God is it possible to move past the dem dry bones stage.

My mother, a lifelong Congregationalist/UCC'er has a habit of forwarding me the most engaging non-false news articles—even in the middle of the night (setting off bells and whistles on my smart phone charging on my bed-stand and waking me up in the wee hours, but I've recently spoken to her about not doing that any more). This past week my phone received something from Reuters News Agency titled, *“Religious Left Emerging as U.S. Political Forces in Trump Era.”* It seems our new President has had a miraculous effect upon dem bones, once known as liberal theology. Where pre-November 8th was a field absent of most signs of animation and life, is today, just a few months on, showing unprecedented signs of revival and rebirth.

New York's Union Theological Seminary has a long standing tradition of holding monthly lectures on social justice. Recently their 600 seat sanctuary has been filled to capacity with three times their normal draw. In January they had to turn away 1,000 people from a lecture. “Never have there been such crowds” said the seminary's President. Can these dry bones live? Yes, by God.

Since the election the number of churches across the country that are offering sanctuary to asylum seekers has doubled to over 800. Can these dry bones live? Yes, gloriously yes.

In January 300 clergy members from all over the country rallied at the U.S. Senate to attempt to block the confirmation of Jeff Sessions as attorney general due to his history of controversial

statements on race. Commented a witness, “Never before have hundreds of clergy turned up to oppose a Cabinet nominee.” Can these dry bones live? Yes, absolutely so.

Financial support too is also picking up. Donations to the Christian activist group, for example, Sojourners, have increased by 30% since the election. Can these dry bone live? By grace, indeed they can.

Friends, as was the case with the Israelites of long ago, today's leftist, progressive, inclusive, liberal Protestants are Exekiel's dry bones—yes we are; and yes, I realize that is not a newsflash for most of us. We are the remnant of the faithful, we are the keepers of tradition, we are ones who are not content to just lie there all dry and dead and everything, because we are the ones who hear and trust in God's animating, life-fulfilling Word.

Can these dry bones live? Now hear the word of the Lord! *“I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live...then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act...and you shall be my people, and I shall be your God.”* -Amen