

Text: Ezekiel 37: 1-14
Title: Dead Ends and Dry Bones
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Let me tell you story that you may have already heard.
It is a hard coarse story.
It is a horror story.
It is a story not to be told in the company of children.
It is a story full of dead ends.
It is a story that is still being written.
Let me tell you a story that you may have already heard ~
but my guess is that you don't know the whole story.

On November 6, 1991 a band of the Charles Taylor Rebels stormed a small village in Liberia. In desert-dusty pick-up trucks and battered Jeeps they roared into the village without warning and unleashed waves of terror. They were part of a violent uprising to overthrow the government of Samuel Doe. The first house they stormed was the home of Sabby Browne. Her father worked for the government as Deputy Chief of Immigration. They bound, beat, and tortured him in unspeakable ways ~ before they killed him. Sabby was restrained and forced to watch.

Then the rebels tore Sabby's infant son, Onesimus, from her hands.
Assaulted her, brutalized her, and left her to die.

Left for dead, with little food and less hope, Sabby and Onesimus escaped into the scrub brush wilderness and walked through the "bush" (Sabby's word for the Liberian countryside) for more than a month. On December 10, they arrived in the Ivory Coast. A family took them in, but after three months, when they could no longer provide the care that Sabby needed; they asked her to leave. Homeless, penniless, helpless, hopeless, a young mother and her baby ~ at a dead end.

On March 12, 1992 Sabby and Onesimus arrived in a refugee camp in Ghana. It was crowded with tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the same horror. Sabby found work weaving hair and found a relationship with a man from Ghana. She had two more children, Rufina and Ndu. The man left her ~ a homeless mother with three children in a refugee camp. Another dead end.

A refugee resettlement program that knits together aide agencies, church efforts, and the cooperation of governments brought Sabby to America. A little church (rooted in hope) cobbled together the money and the means to welcome them to a furnished apartment. And, on a bitter bone chilling February night in 2006, fifteen years after the Charles Taylor Rebels roared into her village, Sabby and her three children arrived in Chicago.

The children were small ~ stunted from malnourishment.
They needed shots and medical attention.
They needed safe strong consistent schools.
They needed a stable community.
They needed hope.

Sabby wrote, “I don’t know where my mother, brother, and sisters are since the Liberian War, but I thank God that I am alive with my children.”

Two years later, after being moved around by the apartment management company, Sabby and her children found themselves in a basement apartment in a block long building, half of which was vacant and boarded up. The electricity was sporadic, the pipes broke and flooded the apartment, cockroaches and mice were plentiful and comfortable, and with no locks on the entryway homeless men sought refuge in the hallway. Another dead end.

Your gifts to the Deacon’s Special Fund recently helped them relocate to a good, clean, safe apartment. This morning Sabby works two jobs, the kids go to school, and they are part of a community of resettled refugees. Thanks be to God.

Now, you can hear that as a story of the remarkable resilience of the human spirit. It contains the tension between the worst impulses in humanity and the best. You can hear it as a celebration of luck, or providence, or the mystery of how some survive in this cruel world, but I invite to you hear it as a living parable of dead ends.

We run stuck in this world.
We hit brick walls.
We get mired in intractable conflicts.
We exhaust options.
We deplete hope and drain help.
We are left for dead.
Our common denominator is dead ends. *You shall surely die* (Lent One.)

Our stories may not be as horrific or dramatic as Sabby’s, but we all have stories. We know the dead ends of bankruptcy, cancer, depression, sexual abuse, lonely loveless relationships, unemployment, heart disease, grieving the loss of a loved one, and family conflicts that won’t budge. We know the dead ends of the Gaza Strip, and the war in Iraq, and gun violence on our own streets, and the profound imbalance of a global economy. Dead ends and dry bones are the way of the world. But, this ancient text opens up a window, an angle, a perspective, a vision....

Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones is not really a story about the resurrection of the dead. Rather, it is used as a metaphor for the renewal of the people of Israel. They were at a dead end. They were exiles in Babylonian captivity. Their land was ravaged, their temple destroyed, and their families scattered. They were refugees in a strange land. They regarded this political and military defeat as an irrevocable historical judgment. Marduk, the God of the Babylonians, had prevailed. Yahweh had proven impotent, their

faith had proven inadequate, and the covenant promises, *You will be a blessing* (Lent Two) had proven insufficient. The formation of a kingdom with a king, *Rise and anoint him; he is the one* (Lent Four) didn't turn out so well either. They had gone the way of all empires; they rise and fall.

So, stuck in Babylon some sat by the river and sang old songs, while others scoffed. They were like a field of bones: dry, dusty, sun bleached, and dead still.
Without breath.
Without help.
Without hope.
Dead end.

Then God called Ezekiel to go stand in the middle of the cemetery. Climb up on a tomb stone, with neck bones and thigh bones and wish bones as far as you can see, and proclaim:

Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

Can we say that over and over again in the unfolding of story of salvation that is the central hope?

Don't be fooled by dead ends.
Don't trust your eyes or ears.
Don't believe the way of the world.
Don't bet on pretty ponies, powerful kings, or piles of money.
Don't believe it when the fat lady sings.
It is not over.
Hope in God.

For when you're without power, when you're weak, when you've run out of options, when you're dead, there is still the breath of God.

And, brittle bones will band together and be blown full of life,
and a dry old man and a barren old women will give birth to a son,
and water will come from a rock,
and a virgin will bear a son,
and the garden tomb will be empty,
and the dead will be resurrected.

Now, that easily gets twisted into a cheap faith in long shots and we get sold a bill of goods that if we believe enough God will turn your scars into stars! And, it skirts the role that Ezekiel's vision played in the story of God's people, for they did return home, and rebuild the temple, and Babylon, that eternal empire, fell in fifty years, but....

But, be that as it may, there is still some deep hope that God continues to breathe new life into dead ends and dry bones. There is still the deep longing that God is

