

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Ezekiel is distinctive in his use of bizarre, almost disturbing images. In the first chapter of his book he describes a vision of God's throne room in which the attending seraphim feature four faces apiece, accompanied by wheels with eyeballs and burning coals of fire. I once saw a recipe for angel sugar cookies that were clearly a reference to Ezekiel, because instead of being shaped like a human figure with wings, and frosted with a flowing gown and hair, these were blobby rounds covered with edible googly eyes. So you want to approach Ezekiel with some care, because he's liable to rear up and take you by surprise.

Fortunately, the scary googly-eyed seraphim are in the early part of his prophecies, when he's warning Judah of their impending doom. Today's reading comes from a later period, when he turns to prophecies of hope and restoration. In Babylon, Ezekiel remained well informed about events in Judah, and his prophecies concern both the exiles and the people who are still in Judah, though those Judeans also get exiled eventually. He addresses both communities as a single entity; all of them are passionately concerned about the fate of Jerusalem, and by the time of today's reading, all of them are deeply demoralized.

The scary image that Ezekiel gives us in this reading, of course, is the valley of dry bones. The hand of the Lord comes upon him, and God's spirit sets him in this valley, and the bones are *very dry*. Why does God ask him, "Mortal, can these bones live?" The honest answer could only be "No" or "Only by a miracle," and Ezekiel certainly isn't able to perform miracles. He evades the question by saying, "Oh LORD God, you know," which is really, really close to a shoulder-shrug, only more respectful. And then God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and

tell them to be covered with sinews and muscle and skin, and to breathe, and to know that God is God.

Here's what I notice: this is a graphic representation of the most hopeless situation ever. It is beyond redemption—a valley full of *very* dry bones. Ezekiel does not see any future here. God, presumably, can do anything, but whatever it is can't happen unless Ezekiel acts on a hope he does not feel, and prophesies new life to the bones. God is telling Ezekiel, "even though you don't know if this thing can happen, I want you to prophesy about it, that it *can* happen, and I want you to prophesy to these very dry and unresponsive dead bones," which is clearly a thing like commanding a stone to speak, you can do it but you know it's not going to work. God is not telling Ezekiel to feel hopeful, or to make a case for hope being justified. God is telling Ezekiel to do something based on *God's* hope, or God's expectation, regardless of how Ezekiel sees things. And indeed, when Ezekiel prophesies obediently to the bones, they rise up and become living human beings, independent of the fact that he didn't think they could. Ezekiel didn't have to talk himself into hoping; he just had to coast on God's hope.

His message in *his* time is that restoration is possible—not that there are signs of restoration for those who know where to look, because there aren't—but that God has plans that do not depend on us agreeing, but do depend on [Ezekiel, in this case] complying with God's plan.

This reminds me of an essay I read in October by Charlotte Clymer, an Army veteran and activist on LGBTQ and other social justice issues.ⁱ She wrote on the occasion of her 35th birthday, saying that she couldn't quite believe she was here. She was born in Oklahoma City to

an 18 year-old mother, who had been born to a 19 year-old, who had been born to a 17 year-old. She writes (and forgive me for the long quote, but she's eloquent),

The two lines that converged to form me—bent and fractured in many places, exhausted in spirit, ever mindful of their low place in the world—have tripped over several generations of drunks, deadbeats, child and spousal abusers, sex offenders, and just about every variety of sexist, racist, and otherwise-bigot one can imagine, to arrive at their joint venture, their latest iteration, in me.

...

I should not be alive right now.

That I made it out of childhood is a small miracle in itself. That I graduated from college is astonishing. That I survived long enough to finally and mercifully come out as a trans woman is yet a greater miracle.

I am very flawed and very human on my own merits, but my god, having climbed this ridiculous mountain, I can see, for hundreds of miles around, the vast collection of my family's imperfections and grievances and ugliness, and for all the uncertainty and confusion enfleshed before me, I survived.

I am a survivor of poverty and rape and physical abuse and gender dysphoria and severe depression, a gathering of maladies that required something far more than just me to overcome them.

I survived because of others.

I survived because of public school teachers who took a dirty little kid from a trailer park being sexually and physically abused and put a book in her hands and space in her heart for dreams.

I survived because of many generations of LGBTQ people, particularly trans women of color, who all-too-painfully and all-too-slowly built and sustained a framework of liberation and pride that has saved countless lives from the abyss, mine included.

I survived because of friends whose examples of generosity and empathy and integrity wordlessly demanded my reciprocation because there's no reason, they implicitly taught, why my family's history should have me resigned to low expectations and a bare minimum of service to others.

I survived because of food stamps and free lunch programs and many tens of millions of people giving over their hard-earned dollars to the government so that children like me could eat and then grow up to make sure future hungry children would have something in their bellies.

I survived because people who have never met me and never knew me decided that they didn't need to know a child, let alone give birth to that child, in order to fight for that child.

. . . my existence is a miracle of humanity's generosity. My life has been largely saved by the moved spirits of people I'll never know.

. . .

My obligation in this life, as it should be for all of us, is bringing light in whatever way I am able against the shadows that are present and those yet to be cast.

That is how I can give thanks to those who brought light to me, and I hope and pray that I am able and I am thankful for every day God has given me to do so.

"Moral, can these bones live?" "Oh LORD God, you know." Charlotte Clymer, by her account, survived and thrived because of people following God's plan of compassion and generosity even if they themselves saw no hope. Public school teachers sat her down with books, which is just what teachers do. LGBTQ people lived their lives visibly, out in the open. Citizens paid taxes that translated into food in little Charlotte's stomach. She says, "For all the [dreadfulness] of this world, my existence is a **miracle** of humanity's generosity."

Miracles are frightening because they violate the expectation of what's possible. That's why people visited by angels are always falling on their faces and saying, "No, not me." Charlotte Clymer sees her existence as a miracle because it should not have been possible. And there's no kindly grandfather or royal patron who saw her potential and carefully nurtured it—according to her, *nobody* pictured in their minds that she had a brilliant future. Random people around her just behaved kindly and generously and empathetically, and God did the rest. But people were necessary to the process. As in Ezekiel's vision, finite human beings are somehow collaborative agents in bringing resurrection to those strewn across the valley, not hindrances or irrelevancies.

This really rings true to me, that I can see no reason for hope and still feel called to do the things as if there were hope. In fact, *God* doesn't even expect us to see where hope lies, or to feel hopeful and determined and strategic, though it's good when we do. God has the capacity to do what we have not even dared to hope for, and yet it's our own kindness and generosity that makes it begin to happen.

God of breath,

You promised new life to your people in exile by breathing into a valley full of dry bones. Breathe new life into us, so that we might live passionately for you. Amen.

¹ <https://charlotteclymer.substack.com/p/giving-thanks-for-breaking-the-cycle-a8d>