

*Ezekiel 37: 1-14*  
*Lent 5 / Year A*  
*9 March 2008*  
*Preached by the Rev. David Fredrickson*

Back in November of **1984** the movie *The Killing Fields* was released. It garnered high praise and won three Academy Awards. It was a brilliant movie about Sydney Schamberg the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist for the New York Times and his relationship with Dith Pran a Cambodian photojournalist. Schamberg and Pran were the two that covered the war in Cambodia and the horrible genocide that took place there after the US military left in **1975**.

There is a scene in this movie that I have never been able to get out of my mind. In it, Schamberg and Pran find themselves in this vast plain or valley and as far as they can see, there are bones, the bones Cambodian people killed by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge political party. On these two men's faces there is disbelief, despair, anguish and grief.

Every time I read Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones this image comes into my mind. The circumstances that brought about Ezekiel's vision were different but no less tragic from those that inspired the movie *The Killing Fields*.

Around **920** BC, the Kingdom of Israel was divided into two parts, that part called Israel to the north and that part called Judah to the south. Judah was where Jerusalem and the temple that King Solomon had built were located. Two hundred years later in **720** BC, the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel taking its capital of Samaria and scattering the people of Israel throughout the Assyrian Empire, an empire that on today's map would be centered in northern Iraq, southern Turkey, western Iran and eastern Syria.

About 135 years later in 587 BC, the Babylonians attacked the southern kingdom of Judah destroying Jerusalem and the temple and taking its population off into exile to Babylon, an ancient city located just south of modern Baghdad also in Iraq. It was during this exile that Ezekiel lived. In fact, he was among the first citizens of Jerusalem taken away. The Old Testament book of Lamentations is a very moving and personal account of the horrific destruction wrought by the Babylonians throughout the city of Jerusalem. So that you may understand the pain of this defilement, I invite you to read through the book of Lamentations found just before the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament.

The Judeans had lost the land promised to their ancestors and granted at the time of Joshua. The temple, where the Lord's glory was known, now lay in ruins, a heap of smoldering rubble. Was it any wonder that those who were exiled were asking the question, is it over for Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; is it over for us Jews, God's chosen people? As a priest living among these exiled Jews in Babylon, Ezekiel confronted these questions, these laments. A people's hopes had perished and without hope, death was the best they could hope for.

It was into this context that Ezekiel had the vision we read this morning. God led him to a valley, a vast plain where as far as he could see, there were bones; dry and brittle bones; the bones of a people slaughtered and unceremoniously dumped. Yes, like that valley of bones encountered by Schamberg and Pran, like the actual plight of the million and a half to two million Cambodians who died at the hands of a despot between 1975 and 1979, nearly 25 percent of that country's population. The anguish and grief on the faces of Schamberg and Pran in that haunting scene is how I picture

Ezekiel looking as he wandered around the valley. “Why God, why did you lead me to this place, to take me even deeper into despair?” “No Ezekiel, I didn’t lead you here to make you suffer more, I led you here to ask you a question, “Do you believe these bones can live? Ezekiel, do you believe there is hope for my people?” “Lord God, only you can know the answer to that question.” Then the Lord God said to Ezekiel “Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” In the midst of his vision, as ridiculous as it might sound, Ezekiel does as the Lord commands him and he watches it unfold just as God said it would, a valley of dry bones becoming animated with life.

The point of this vision isn’t to prove that God can literally re-create whole human beings from brittle bones, though he has done much more. Rather the point of this vision is the hope that such a vision imparts to Ezekiel and ultimately to God’s people. Ezekiel was privy to this vision of hope because it was his job to relay it to the rest of God’s people and convince them of its truth, a truth that did ultimately come to pass.

Where are your dry bones this morning? What parts of your journey through this life are in need of resuscitation and reanimation? Do you and I dare ask the God of resurrection to breathe life into these shadows or will we be content to wander the valley of our own dry bones wringing our hands wondering what will become of them and us?

This is the place where Mary and Martha found themselves the day their brother Lazarus died. When Jesus arrived a few days later, Martha looked upon the face of

God and said, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Jesus looked into her pain and said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this Martha?” How about you? Do you believe? Do you believe that there is hope for your dry bones, limitless mercy in the midst of your failures and shortcomings; do you believe that God can save you from the clutches of death?

As we begin the final days and weeks of our Lenten journey, let's us all aspire to go with God into those places within us where our bones are dry, those places where we are in need resuscitation and reanimation. Through prayer, let us ask God to breathe the breath of life and salvation into those places of failure and pain. And then let us wait with eager and longing hearts and watch as God transforms our lives.

In Jesus Name; Amen.