

The bones of exile

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I remember I stopped dead in my tracks. I had been walking along the flat, dark shale bed of the ravine behind my grandfather's farmhouse in southern Indiana. There on the ground, still in perfect alignment, lay the skeleton of a cow that had wandered away one winter many years ago and had slipped and fallen into the ravine. The bones lay in precise order—the head bone connected to the neck bone, the neck bone connected to the back bone, and so on.

All the cow skeleton seemed to need was a breath of life, and all its bones would rise up and scamper back up the side of the ravine, back home to the paddock for fresh water and hay, back to the company of the herd.

This was just the skeleton of a single cow. Now imagine a valley filled with skeletons, human bones dry, brittle, bleached, scattered on the parched ground. That is the image that our first reading starts with.

The book of the prophet Ezekiel is full of strange, sometimes macabre imagery. Ezekiel is thought to have written it in response to his own and his nation's experience of exile from Jerusalem. Ezekiel, himself a member of the religious elite, was taken into the Babylonian captivity in 597. In the process his wife died, and he lost access to the temple, the center of his faith. Nonetheless, he was given the mantle of spiritual leader for the Jewish community in exile.

Cut off from the temple in Jerusalem, in servitude to the Babylonians, how shall the people now live? How shall they live amid the death of exile?

This is the question Ezekiel asks when he recounts the vision of God leading him into the Valley of the Dry Bones. God looks across the vast valley of death and challenges Ezekiel: “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel’s answer: God alone can breathe life into these bones. God breathes life into the dead bones, covers them in tissue and sinew. God raises the dead to new life.

Who are the people around you who are dying in exile from the love of God and community? How can the church, newly enlivened by the breath of God, animate the desiccated souls of people who feel exiled? How can we renew social systems that have decomposed and no longer give life?