

“HEAR ME, O MORTALS”
EZEKIEL 37:1-14
JUNE 7, 2020

THE FIRST TESTAMENT STORY OF EZEKIEL AND THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES IS FULL OF RICH IMAGERY AND METAPHOR. THE JEWISH REMNANT OF 600 BCE SUFFERED UNDER THE HEAVY HAND OF BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY. JERUSALEM, THE CENTER OF THEIR RELIGIOUS LIFE, WAS IN RUINS; GOD’S TEMPLE LAY DESTROYED. THEIR FAMILIES HAD BEEN SEPARATED AND SLAUGHTERED. VIOLENT TAKEOVERS OF WHOLE PEOPLES WAS THE ORDER OF THE DAY. THOSE WITH POWER BRUTALLY SUBJUGATED OTHERS. SOME OF THOSE WITH PRIVILEGE WERE SPARED, BUT THE RECKONING AGAINST THE KINGDOM OF JUDAH TORE APART THE FABRIC OF THEIR RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL LIFE. HOW IN THE MIDST OF SUCH SUFFERING AND DISORIENTATION WERE THE PEOPLE TO TRUST THAT GOD WOULD BREATHE LIFE AGAIN INTO THEIR DRY BONES? FROM EZEKIEL’S PROPHECIES, THE 37TH CHAPTER, VERSES 1-14, HEAR WHAT THE TIMELESS SPIRIT OFFERS TO GOD’S PEOPLE:

GOD grabbed me. GOD’s Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun.

He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

I said, “Master GOD, only you know that.”

He said to me, “Prophecy over these bones: ‘Dry bones, listen to the Message of GOD!’”

GOD, the Master, told the dry bones, “Watch this: I’m bringing the breath of life to you and you’ll come to life. I’ll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You’ll come alive and you’ll realize that I am GOD!”

I prophesied just as I’d been commanded. As I prophesied, there was a sound and, oh, rustling! The bones moved and came together, bone to bone. I kept watching. Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. But they had no breath in them.

He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath. Prophecy, oh Mortal. Tell the breath, ‘GOD, the Master, says, Come from the four winds. Come, breath. Breathe on these slain bodies. Breathe life!’”

So, I prophesied, just as he commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge multitude.

Then God said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Listen to what they’re saying: ‘Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there’s nothing left of us.’”

“Therefore, prophesy. Tell them, ‘GOD, the Master, says: I’ll dig up your graves and bring you out alive—O my people! Then I’ll take you straight to the land of Israel. When I dig up graves and bring you out as my people, you’ll realize that I am GOD. I’ll breathe my life into you, and you’ll live. Then I’ll lead you straight back to your land and you’ll realize that I am GOD. I’ve said it and I’ll do it. GOD’s Decree.’”

Here ends the lesson. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

The film I offered you this week, “Yesterday,” is on the surface a heartwarming story about a gentle young man trying to make his living as a singer-songwriter in current-day Britain. He is a one-trick pony, his only completed effort a lackluster tune he titles, “Summer Song.” He is the personification of “dry bones,” existing but not living a particularly satisfying life, loving others’ music but not his own, loving Ellie, his manager, as a friend but not at all understanding her romantic love for him.

“Yesterday’s” screenplay can be framed as a parable to help us understand the meaning of Ezekiel’s odd prophecy. Ezekiel’s prophecies date to the time of the Babylonian Exile in the mid-500s BCE. In 605, King Nebuchadnezzar (I want that name in my next life) of Babylon besieges Jerusalem in the Southern Kingdom of Judah and demands that a tribute—an involuntary tax- be paid to him. In 597, Jerusalem’s King Jehoiakim refuses to pay the tribute. Nebuchadnezzar lowers the boom, destroying Jerusalem and its Temple. He orders the slaughter of most of the population but holds out and takes captive the best and the brightest, a remnant of the Jewish population that is taken to Babylon and held there for some 60 years until Babylon is in turn, conquered by Persia’s King Cyrus. In 538 BCE, Cyrus allows the Jews to return to Jerusalem so that they can rebuild it in his honor and for his benefit.

It is against this backdrop of ruin and exile that Ezekiel emerges as a prophet to the remnant Jews in captivity, promising them that God will restore their “dry

bones” and breathe new life into them as a people so they may again live and know that God is their God.

According to Biblical scholar and professor Anna Carter Florence, there are actually three sermons within this one passage. These three sermons line up rather nicely with the film, “Yesterday’s” message, especially when viewed through the lens of our current social disorientation. First up in Ezekiel’s prophecy is the hopeful promise of God to the Jews in exile. “ **Thus, says the Lord: Hear me, O Mortals. I will make your dry bones live and you shall know that I am the Lord.**” How does this prophecy have meaning for us today? “Yesterday” shows us how.

Jack Malik is the anti-hero of the film. He lacks conventional heroic attributes. He is a millennial man of East Indian heritage, a Brit living and working in an English town as a warehouse stocker and a struggling musician. He encounters not-so-subtle racism in his everyday life. We are certainly aware of it as we watch the film. His very proper, lily-white boss tells Jack that his dark, bushy beard “gets on my nerves.” The scene shows the smugness of white privilege and the types of comments people of color are expected to quietly accept.

Jack struggles to get anyone to listen to his music. We get the distinct impression that his race is incongruent with his image as a freestyle songwriter, a factor that causes his concerts to be attended almost exclusively only by his few loyal friends. The underlying suggestion is, “How in the world can a skinny, dark, commonly talented East Indian man be the hero of a mostly white English story?”

Jack doesn’t think God gives a rip about him; he is dry bones personified. He laments to Ellie, his manager and friend, that, “If God was even *remotely*

interested in my stuff, he would once, *just once*, send me a fan letter that wasn't from my mom."

About to quit music altogether and to retreat into a very ordinary and unsatisfactory existence, he experiences a life-altering moment that will change his direction. An accident on his bicycle during a 12-second sudden power outage across the world leaves him without some of his teeth, but with a gift that gives him new life and breath: he appears to the only person in the world that remembers the Beatles and their music.

Here in the story, the parable of Jack Malik intersects with the second of Ezekiel's sermonic prophecies: **"Thus says the Lord: Hear me, O Mortals. I will cause you to breathe, and you shall know that I am the Lord."**

Jack could have been killed when he was struck on his bicycle by a trolley bus. His singing career might have been trashed along with his smashed-up guitar. But breath is restored to him when his friends buy him a beautiful new instrument. Grateful for their kindness and generosity, he strums and sings them the genius song familiar already to us as Paul McCartney and John Lennon's "Yesterday." They are transfixed and ask him if he wrote it. He looks at them like they are crazy and says, "No! The Beatles wrote it." It is then that we learn that the world has no collective memory of the Beatles; in fact, his Google search afterwards shows no record of them ever existing at all.

God has performed a miracle in Jack Malik's life, restored his dry bones and breathed new life into them. This miracle takes the form of a rich and deep musical library of Beatles songs that he recalls, learns to sing and play and then fraudulently claims as his own work. His stardom is assured from this point forward. (Now before you turn away from the antihero Jack because of his dishonest actions, remember the Hebrew Bible is full of colorful characters who

receive God's blessing even though they are imperfect heroes—Abraham, Moses and King David to name but a few.)

Jack becomes a megastar and is hailed as a great songwriter. He only sings Beatles songs from that day forward. It is a slippery slope for him, one that requires more and more lying to maintain the fiction.

He appears to be headed for disaster, for the lying is eating him up. A chance encounter, though, radically changes his life. In a gentle and wise conversation, Jack is shown by a mythical figure the righteous path back to his own authenticity. It is in that aha! moment that the antihero is restored to the moral and blessed man he was always meant to be.

Enter the third sermon of Ezekiel's prophecy where **dry bones and hungry lungs represent the whole house of Israel.**

So says the Lord:

Hear me, O Mortals. I will open your graves, lift you all up cleanly and restore you to your own soil on the other side of the portal of your deep grief and lamentation. All people there will live and breathe. And they will know that I have done this thing; they will know that I am the Lord.

When Jack has his epiphany moment late in the film, not only is he restored, but with his new breath the people of his life—his parents, his true beloved, his friends and his fans are likewise renewed, grateful for his redemption. His relationship with God is made right. Though he may not speak of it or recognize this overtly, we do for him, and we can feel it in our own bones and skin. As a parable apropos to our own setting in the world in these broken times, Jack's transformation from dry bones and thin air to a supple spirit and full lungs can be just the portal Ezekiel offers us.

Thus, says the Lord: Hear, O Mortals, God has a plan to restore our own dry bones and brittle lungs to new life. This will not be the old life, the “normal” life. This new life lived on the other side of the portal will be a life that centers not around the pronouns “I” and “me,” but instead around the words, “we” and “all.”

Egocentrism leads to a desert existence where we are the central characters who nurture only sand and cactus. Life can stagnate when we are confined indoors, when people are denied three-dimensional contact with friends and family, and when everyone looks the same all masked up and uptight. Add to the pandemic of COVID-19 the pandemic of civil unrest.

There has been a horrific and unmistakable awakening of late to some deep-core problems in our world. Unmasked is the ugly face of racism that white society has largely ignored, instead taken for granted and economic gain. This is racism that black Americans have borne with increasing frustration and tragedy until it all boiled over in recent weeks in the senseless murder of a restrained and non-combative black man by white police officers on a street in Minneapolis. Though we have heard of other such incidents of brutality, this one we witnessed, over and again, on the news and social media.

It is no longer deniable that as a world society we exist in a valley of dry bones. It is no longer a mystery that as a people we are fresh-air deprived. For a very long time we will remember the words, “I can’t breathe” as an urgent prayer to God to rescue and release the captive into God’s holy plan for justice and compassion.

The earth will not breathe freely again until we make wholesale changes in our priorities and prejudices. Dry bones will not be reattached and sewn back together into a viable lifeform until mortals collectively listen for God’s Word. God will not be able to get that Word in edgewise until we lay down our

weapons of war and give up our dogged determination to make God serve *our* needs. This exercise in folly, this emotion of the ego, is nothing new. Ezekiel was speaking it 2600 years ago; we still try today to force God to do our will.

Which character in Ezekiel's and Jack's stories are you? Do you consider yourself a prophet, one who calls out wrongs and injustices, exhorting the people to turn back to the God who loves them unconditionally?

Are you a person in exile needing to hear God's word but turning away instead to pursue your own wants and needs?

Are you King Nebuchadnezzar, forcibly scorching the earth so as to get your way, greedily gobbling up the spoils of war and tributes paid? Or maybe you live as King Jehoiakim of the Kingdom of Judah, foolishly flaunting your privilege, denying the reality of fate, refusing to wear your mask out in public for your safety and the safety of others, and blaming your disasters on the other guys because you did not heed the warning signs of the world's brokenness?

In Jack's story, do you see yourself as the anti-hero, the person others say is a loser—not good enough, not strong enough, not talented enough, not attractive enough? More importantly, when someone tears you down and belittles you, do you accept their indictment as true?

Maybe you are Ellie, Jack's dutiful, loyal manager and Number One Fan, the one who takes care of everyone else at the expense of your own fulfillment and happiness? Are you Paul McCartney and Ringo Starr who recognize the power of the "Yesterday" script and donate your music to the project for the healing energy it brings? Or are you the music agent who exploits the vulnerability of the underrepresented, unempowered everyman who is lost and is looking to you to point the way?

Perhaps you are the poet, the sage long in the tooth who asks the rhetorical question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” This wise old familiar man advises Jack: “Do you want a good life? it’s not complicated. Tell the girl you love that you love her and tell the truth wherever you can.”

Relatable stories help people to seek out and hear what Spirit is saying to them. I trust that the Spirit of God-Alive is speaking now to us, the descendants of Israel.

Thus, says the Lord:

Hear me, O Mortals: I will open your graves, lift you all up and bring you through the decaying portal of your old life into the lightness of the new. You must not try to pull through the gate the carcasses of your old ‘normal’ ways of being. You must be willing to be upset and uprooted for a time; you must be willing to give up your transparencies and your prejudices, your human need to be superior and entitled in the face of the oppressed. Through this portal, on the other side of your old life of dry bones and shallow breath, all will live and breathe without pain, without gasping. And finally, *finally*, you will know that I am the Lord.

May It Be So.

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