



Beyond Dry Bones: Into the Deep

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Luke 5:1-7

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Good afternoon, Church. What a joy it is for us to be here, gathered once again as a part of the body of Christ. The psalmist said: "I was glad when they said unto me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" (Psalm 122:1). And this is the house of God in this moment, because we as the people of God are gathered in this place for worship. We are gathered to give God thanks and praise. Gathered because God is good and worthy to be praised. And so we give God thanks for all we have received thus far and for all we are about to receive today, and in the days to come.

Join with me in prayer, and this prayer is adapted from *Oceans*¹ by Hillsong. Let us pray...

Holy God, you are calling us out upon the waters,
into the great unknown where feet may fail
And there we will find You in the mystery
In oceans deep our faith will stand
And we will call upon Your Name O God
And keep our eyes above the waves
When oceans rise
our souls will rest in Your embrace
For we are Yours and You are ours.
And let the church say, Amen

The theme for this General Synod is "into the deep." And I've spent quite a few months reflecting on this text and I often think about what it means for us to draw closer to God, to be more rooted, more grounded, more centered, to experience more of God's presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. I want to share with you one of my poems and this one is titled *blooming bones* based on Ezekiel 37:1-3 to get us started. Listen to these words.

blooming bones
by Karen Georgia Thompson

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ezekiel 37:1-3)

¹ <https://www.google.com/search?client=safari&rls=en&q=lyrics+of+oceans&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8>

valley of dry bones
absent of life
Can these dry bones live?
evidence of wanting
a stockpile of life gone
piled high to the sky
devoid of breath
no purpose
none collecting
none commenting
all watching
these dry bones
none to prophesy

standing in the valley
staring at these bones
their confounded presence
haunting the living
their brittle dryness
glistening in the sun
filtering through leaves
their stark whiteness
contrasting grass
green of trees
fertile earth brown
bodies
no longer flesh and bone
Can these dry bones live?
who will prophesy?

what died
leaving this valley of bones?
the breath
of our humanity?
our will to live love?
disparaging skin
as sin
decrying gender
as inferior
depicting human sexuality
as ungodly
prophesy to the dryness
bringing breath to the slain

who died
leaving this valley of bones?
is this pile of whiteness
African Ancestors long passed?
our black and brown children
prematurely taken

mistaken as threat?
their white bones
in the sun
mocking the glorification of whiteness
undistinguishable
from the bones of bitter oppressors
who will prophesy to these bones?

standing in the valley
staring at these bones
listening to the breadth
of a past forgotten
wishing for the wisdom
of Ancestors crying
bones weeping dryness
tears unseen
as the clouds roll over
the sky opens
speaking into this valley
waters rolling down
bringing a new thing
blowing from the four winds

tear drops
rain drops
waters of hope
splashing dreams and visions
the Mystery
of dust turned mud
pollen from trees
these bones live
from them emerge petals
blooming bones
in the valley
a new generation
watching hope emerge
standing in the valley
staring at these bones
prophesying truth

7:56
KGAT
26 March 2018
Macdonough, GA

The title of today's sermon is "Beyond Dry Bones: Into the Deep." There is a resident dryness, perhaps even shallowness that is evidenced around us in these days. We lament the experiences of those in need. We cry out for justice in the public square and at times, it feels like we are crying into the wilderness, shouting into a vacuum with no one listening or

responding. We're growing tired and weary, the energy to persist seeming to wane with each passing day.

Sometimes we are bereft of hope, wondering when and how things will change. Wondering at the presence of God in a world where the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Last week, the United States Congress passed a budget that will result in millions losing access to health care, to anti-hunger programs and anti-poverty resources. There are cuts to federal programs that provided vaccinations and assisted with sustainable development for millions. Meanwhile, that same bill provided tax cuts for the wealthy, increased the national debt, and will increase military spending significantly. Xenophobia is rampant. Our children are going hungry, and undernourished, undereducated, and oppressed in a time where ageism is wielded like a two-edged sword. These are some of the dry bones, piling high in the valleys of our lives.

The global picture is of equal concern. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency: "More than 120 million individuals have been forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. We are now witnessing at this day and age the highest levels of displacement on record."²

By May 2024, last year, more than 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. This includes:

- 43.4 million refugees globally
- 63.3 million internally displaced people (those are individuals in country because of the challenges we just talked about)
- 6.9 million asylum seekers
- 5.8 million people in need of international protection, a majority from Venezuela³

120 million people is the equivalent of Japan's population, the 12th largest country in the world by population. The top six causes of displacement are: 1. Drought · 2. Hunger · 3. Flooding · 4. Earthquakes · 5. War & conflict · 6. Economic circumstances. These too are the dry bones that are piling up around us.

The bone yard in this valley is filled with the dryness of despair. Where hope resided, we are left wondering what we can do next to see the reality of a just world for all. Can these dry bones live, the prophet wondered. We too are left perplexed in a world where war persists, a world where governments make decisions to eradicate lives based on their fear of the other and their subscriptions to their own sovereignty over those of others. The disregard for the lives of the Indigenous, the children, the women, the hungry, the poor, the disabled, the homeless is absent of life. Can these dry bones live?

The text from Luke is the text from which the General Synod theme comes. I am holding this text and theme before us for the triennium to come. This is goal and aspiration, a place to anchor our hopes and live more fully in our commitments to being followers of Jesus. This is a time for us to reach out for the possibility of all things as we experience God present with us,

² <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/#:~:text=Global Trends At-a-Glance&text=This includes;6.9 million asylum seekers>

³ <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/#:~:text=Global Trends At-a-Glance&text=This includes;6.9 million asylum seekers>

leading, guiding and directing us. Today, tomorrow, moving forward, we are being invited, led, pulled into deeper relationship with God.

Let me recap the text: the disciples were fishing all night. And they caught absolutely nothing. They were back at the shore when they met Jesus who sat in their boat and taught the people. After he was done, he told them to go back out into their boats. He told them to push out into the deep and cast their nets. What was different about this moment than the last? Jesus said: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" (Luke 5:4). This was not a request or a question. I would say, he strongly suggested that they do as he said, with the inference that there would be a different outcome than they had experienced prior. They were skilled fishermen, Jesus was a carpenter, I am sure they had their doubts.

In fact, they were tired. They had been fishing all night. They were ready to go home. They were done. They were not ready for this moment.

Peter's response reflects the resistance of the fishermen: "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets" (v.5). I heard a bit of attitude I don't know about you, in the "if you say so." That "if you say so" is a loaded response where I come from and I have to tell you when I heard that "if you say so" my dear departed mother came to mind. I could not use that "if you say so" to my Momma or any elder. In fact, an if you say so feels little disrespectful, and doubtful and most of all discouraged. It is the kind of thing you utter with a deep sigh. If you say so has attitude. You can also render that with your eyes closed and the same deep sigh for a different effect.

Whatever the experience that was felt by Jesus' words, those men got back in that boat, pushed away from the shore and dropped their nets. The results were phenomenal. More fish than they could contain. Broken nets. Having to call for the second boat to get it all to the shore. Their obedience, in spite of their human response, and that little bit of attitude won the day.

I believe we are feeling weary these days. The infighting is bitter. The politics are dividing. We are unsure of what to say and who to say it to. There is anger and disbelief present and we are tired. Some of us are beyond tired, we are sick and tired of being sick and tired. The dry bones are collecting and we are worn out. The dry bones are present and we are unclear of what it is that we are to do. We want to go home and rest. We want to release these notions of bringing about change. We are heartbroken and we are afraid. And here comes Jesus with a word in season. The gospel narrative is a word for us today, church. Jesus is calling. The word for today is: "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch" The question is, are you ready, church?

Here on the plains the deep is understood in the depth of the prairie grass whose roots can grow 5 to 15 feet and possibly more into the soil. The University of North Iowa Tallgrass Prairie Center offers the following about prairie grass, we have to expand our consciousness people: "Hidden deep underground, the massive root systems of prairie plants often extend deeper into the soil than the stems that rise above it. En masse, these densely tangled roots provide a variety of ecosystem services. Strategic use of prairie grass in the landscape slows runoff, reduces soil loss, lessens the severity of flooding, and rebuilds the structure of damaged soil. But like the roots themselves, these benefits often go unnoticed."⁴ Sometimes,

⁴ <https://tallgrassprairiecenter.org/resources/prairie-roots>

church when we're pushing into the deep, it feels like what we're doing goes unnoticed. But God knows "The deep roots of tallgrass prairie grasses enables them to survive harsh conditions, with over 75% of the plant's biomass located underground."⁵

This too is what it means to go into the deep, to ground ourselves in ways that allow us to be resilient and impact the ecosystem around us in positive ways. Finding our way into spiritual depth is this moment into the deep.

One of my favorite hymns, I grew up with hymns, and one of my favorites is "My Soul has been Anchored."

My Soul Has Been Anchored
by Douglas Miller

Though the storms keep on raging in my life
And sometimes it's hard to tell the night from day
Still that hope that lies within is reassured
As I keep my eyes upon the distant shore
I know that God will lead me safely to
That blessed place He has prepared
... But if the storms don't cease
And if the winds keep on blowing in my life
My soul has been anchored in the Lord⁶

That's what it means to dig deep. That's what it means to be anchored in God. For those of us who live in places where depth is understood in the waters of lakes, rivers, seas and oceans, Jesus' command is understood differently and equally as applicable for our lives. Pressing out into the deep takes risk and requires care. Into the deep with our relationship with God and with others means we may get in over our heads and yet, we will be okay. We may need to go further than we ever have and yet, the presence of God will be with us.

Psalm Chapter 42 is one of my favorites, a psalm where the writer expresses a deep longing for God. The dryness of these times and the brittleness of the bones around us have left us parched and dry, calling out for God, longing for that which we cannot name, the deep longing emanating from our souls. The song said,

As a deer longs for flowing streams,
so my soul longs for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.
When shall I come and behold
the face of God? (v.1-2)

Where shall we come and behold the face of God? The spiritual practices that we have must get us deeper and sustain us. The spiritual care we exercise one for one another has to be a present thing with us in this moment. These are places where we see God. The quiet we dare

⁵ <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/flint-hills-tallgrasses.htm>

⁶ *My Soul Has Been Anchored*, Song by Douglas Miller · 1992

to sit in. The vulnerability we choose to display in the presence of that which is holy and cannot be understood. This is where we come to behold the face of God. God can be found in the mundane. And in the deep mystery. God can be found in the phenomenological experiences of our lives. Yes, God will be made known to us when we seek hard after God. Seek God and you will find God.

Either scenario, church, water or prairie grass, United Church of Christ, we are being called to confront the valley of dry bones piling up around us. To do so, whether we understand depth as prairie grass, waters or some other metaphor. We must find our way to the depth in our relationship with God, surrendered to the deep longing for the Mystery. Our spiritual lives require attention and our spiritual growth is dependent on the intention of finding spiritual practices that will nurture and strengthen our souls. The commitment to justice will cause us to grow weary. The commitment to love our neighbor as ourselves will be challenging and distressing because that's people for you. Yet, into the deep we go, together as the church, called to bear to the world the love of God for all people.

The psalmist said: "Deep calls to deep." That is to say our deep need creates a deep longing. And perhaps our deep longing creates a deep need to draw yet closer to the divine.

We are the waters of hope, the roots of the prairie grass. We are the new generation, watching hope emerge. We are that generation standing in the valley of dry bones, prophesying truth. Can these dry bones live, church?

Hear the words of the prophet for the living of these days: "Prophecy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. Thus says the Lord God to these bones 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" Ezekiel 37:4-6.

A word in season, United Church of Christ, no matter who you are, or where you are on this journey you are being invited to go deeper into the heart of the Divine. It matters not where your neighbor is - in the prairie, by the ocean, or on the lake. It matters not what you use to measure depth. We can get bogged down in semantics. This is not that moment. It is time for us to prophesy to these dry bones and that will require pressing into deeper relationship with God and living the love of God given to us through Jesus Christ. We have the power of Jesus Christ, given to us as a gift, we need to walk in the certainty that God has already given to us everything that we need for this journey. We must believe that we have no lack. That scarcity is rooted in fear. We need to know that every single thing that we need has already been provided and that where we are is where we need to be. And we need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide us into the wilderness and through it for this moment. Because God has great things for us to do today. And it means that we need to let go of flesh and blood, and allow the Holy Spirit to be poured out and poured forth for us. May it be so. Amen!

Benediction

God's grace abounds in deepest waters

God's sovereign hand will be our guide
Where feet may fail and fear surrounds us
God has never failed and won't start now

Spirit lead us where our trust is without borders
Let us walk upon the waters
Wherever You would call us
Take us deeper than our feet could ever wander
And our faith will be made stronger
In the presence of our Savior
Text here