"Can these bones live?"

A sermon on Ezekiel 37 in response to the Trail of Death

Mara Weaver Boshart

In 1838, not quite a decade after the US government passed the Indian Removal Act allowing the removal of Indigenous groups from east of the Mississippi, a group of Potawatomi in the young state of Indiana were rounded up, under the guise of a church meeting, after their leader refused to sign an agreement with the US government to cede the land where his people lived.

A few days later, the group began the grueling march that would come to be known as the Trail of Death. They began the trek in September; heat was abundant, water and food scarce. Dozens, sometimes hundreds, were plagued by illness on any given day. These woodland people were slowly dragged from the forests, gently rolling hills, rivers and lakes that they had known for generations, until they were far enough away to abandon their hope of returning home. This was not just "home" in a sentimental sense; this was the land that sustained them, the land where they knew how to build shelters, treat illness, forage, plant, harvest, and store food. They were going to a place where, because they had no relationship with that land and had not inherited wisdom about it, they did not know how to feed, shelter, clothe, or heal their families.

The caravan arrived two months later near present-day Osawatomie, Kansas, with winter upon them, only to find that the homes and farmland that had been promised to them were nonexistent. By that point, an estimated forty-one members of their group had already died along the way, most of them children. In an effort to stave off even more death, they soon continued south, on to Sugar Creek Mission, a Catholic-run mission where some of the other previously removed Potawatomi groups had ended up. Over the next decade at Sugar Creek, approximately six hundred more Potawatomi died.

In June 2019, I was part of a group of eighteen people who spent a week retracing this path of forced removal traveled by a group of around

eight hundred Potawatomi persons from northern Indiana to eastern Kansas nearly two hundred years ago.

The purpose of the trip was not just to learn and remember but to lament as well. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has written that through lament Israel names its "hurt and anger," submits this hurt and anger to God, and finally relinquishes it. Only after this relinquishment is Israel once again capable of praise. Brueggemann makes it clear that covenant relationship requires lament. This is because God's omnipotence is not "conventional"; it does not ask us to be "docile reactors." God does not seek empty praise or doxologies spoken out of distant fear. In all God's power, *God is still fundamentally relational*: God is, as Brueggemann says, "capable of and willing to be respondent and not only initiator."[1]

Brueggemann cautions,

> *A community of faith which negates lament soon concludes that the hard issues of justice are improper questions to pose at the throne, because the throne seems to be only a place of praise. I believe it thus follows that if justice questions are improper questions at the throne . . . they soon appear to be improper questions in public places, in schools, in hospitals, with the government, and eventually even in the courts. Justice questions disappear into civility and docility. The order of the day comes to seem absolute, beyond question, and we are left with only grim obedience and eventually despair. The point of access for serious change has been forfeited when the propriety of [lament] is denied.*[2]

Lament is not just cathartic but necessary. It is part of what Brueggemann calls "responsible faith."[3] Lament keeps the door open for questions of systemic justice *and*, more importantly, God's intervention to bring such justice about.

Lament was a task that struck our group, the vast majority of us being descendants of white settlers, as a fitting way to begin to respond to this tragic—though unfortunately not unique—event in the history of the land now called the United States. In the face of a problem so expansive

1 Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 11, no. 36 (October 1986): 57–71, quote at 61.

2 Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 64.

3 Brueggemann, "Costly Loss of Lament," 61.

and permeating, it is easy—at least from a white settler perspective, safeguarded by privilege—to throw your hands up and say, "This is too far gone; the removal and genocide of Indigenous peoples on this land began so long ago and has done so much damage, I don't even know where to begin trying to make things right." Our group found that lament is one way to take a step out of ignorance or paralysis toward a world where God's shalom is expected, demanded, and realized.

Most evenings, the group would gather for a short time to debrief the day. One of the questions that Katerina, one of our group leaders, often posed to us was, "Where have you seen Christ today?" Each time I heard this question, I desperately wanted to be able to answer it, but I found myself at a loss. I could not recognize Christ's presence in the midst of this Trail of Death, much less proclaim it with any confidence. I could do the first part of lament—the sad part, the naming of pain and injustice, the articulation of hurt and anger. But the second part of lament—the part that actually moves us toward hope based in the expectant call for God to exercise justice, the reassurance of God with us—that was elusive.

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One of the Scripture texts we heard several times during the trip was Luke 24:13–35, the road to Emmaus, a story in which some of Jesus's disciples also fail to identify Christ's presence.

In the text, it's been two days since Jesus died. These two followers of Jesus are making their way to a village outside of Jerusalem, and they're reviewing the shock and chaos of the last few days. Jesus waltzes right up—but, of course, they don't recognize him—and he joins them on their walk, coyly asking, "So whatchya talking about?"

They look at him like he must live under a rock. "Are you the only one around here who doesn't know what has happened in Jerusalem these last few days?"

He pushes further, "Whatever do you mean?"

So they indulge this clueless stranger, explaining to him that there was this prophet named Jesus who seemed to be the real deal, but in the end, Jewish leaders had handed him over to the Roman authorities who then killed him.

These disciples and their friends were rather disappointed about all of this because they thought he was going to be the new King David and redeem Israel. Now it's been a few days, so the clock is really ticking, and it would seem at this point that Jesus is *really* quite dead—except for the fact that Mary and Mary Magdalene and Joana went to the tomb just this morning, and Jesus's body wasn't there, *and*, what is more, some angels told them that Jesus was alive. Of course, the other disciples couldn't take their word for it, so they went to check it out too, and they couldn't find him either, dead *or* alive.

At this point, unrecognized Jesus, cheeky as ever, responds to his walking buddies, "Oh all that stuff? Yeah, I know about that, but *you all* clearly don't get it. Let me straighten some things out for you, help you understand (one more time) why all of these things had to happen."

So he tells them the whole story, from the beginning, going back through all the prophets to help them understand the trajectory of the Messiah.

They finish their conversation and arrive at their destination, and Jesus keeps on cruising ahead, but the other two offer their new friend some hospitality. They ask him to stay with them because it's nearly evening. They sit down to eat, Jesus takes the bread and blesses it, their eyes are opened, and in their moment of recognition, he vanishes.

They turn to one another—I imagine in quite the state—and say, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the Scriptures to us? Seriously, how did we not recognize our own Messiah?"

So they get right back up and head back to Jerusalem—where they just came from. They find the eleven and report to them that they have seen the risen Christ in the flesh.

As we followed the Trail of Death, I felt like the disciples, enveloped by the apparent reality of death, both past and present, around me. I could not see past it to recognize the Risen Christ.

In his commentary on Luke, John Carroll writes that this story "chronicles the transformation of Jesus' followers as, in fits and starts, they are led from *uncomprehending discouragement* to *perceptive faith*."[4] As with these disciples, so too I have felt "uncomprehending discouragement" rather than "perceptive faith." And yet this story reminds me that

4 John T. Carroll, *Luke: A Commentary*, New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing, 2012), 475.

the Living Christ walks with us even when our eyes are not yet opened to his presence. Through this text from Ezekiel, and through my own experience on the Trail of Death, I offer testimony these "fits and starts," the move from the *defeat* of uncomprehending discouragement to the *hope* of perceptive faith, as I ask whether the oppressed and conquerors can be revived, together.

So back to our good friend and trusty prophet Ezekiel. To set the scene, Israel has been defeated by Babylon, deported from their homeland, and Ezekiel, while in exile, has predicted the fall of Jerusalem, God's dwelling place among God's chosen people.

We picked up the story in chapter 37, the end of a section that, as one commentator puts it, "depict[s] the extent to which God is willing to go to transform the will of the people, care for the weak, raise up the spirits of the desolate and despondent, and create peace in the land. In all this, God's deepest desire is to dwell among the people forever."[5] So the question that confronts Israel at this point is, If God wants to dwell with Israel (despite their less than perfect record), but Babylon destroys Jerusalem, where will God dwell? God's place and God's people are, seemingly, utterly destroyed, uninhabitable for God's presence, unable to carry out God's shalom mission.

With this question at the forefront, God takes Ezekiel into this vision of a vast valley, full of dry, lifeless bones. As long as I can remember, the image that I have had for the valley of Ezekiel's vision is the elephant graveyard from *The Lion King*—the scary place where Simba and Nala wind up after they refuse to follow the rules and where they are chased by hyenas. But despite my juvenile depiction, this valley is not an elephant graveyard but a battlefield, covered in the Israelite death that Babylon has left in its wake.

Our tendency may be to think about the life of each individual whose bones reside in this valley, but for God and Ezekiel, "it is not about the resurrection of the individual but about whether a dead *people* can become alive again."[6]

God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?"

Ezekiel responds, "O Lord God, you know."

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5 Gordon Matties, "Ezekiel," in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, edited by Walter J. Harrelson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 1154.

6 Matties, "Ezekiel," 1211.

It is unclear whether Ezekiel defers to God as a nod to God's sovereignty and the divine intention that permeate this story or out of his own, dare I say, uncomprehending discouragement. Perhaps it is both.

God says, "Go on and let them have it. Prophesy to these bones, and they *shall* live. Speak my intention into this seemingly insurmountable tragedy and see what happens."

So Ezekiel speaks, and the bones come together, and bodies form. But they are not yet alive. They lack breath. God then tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath to come from the four winds and fill the lifeless bodies. God makes it clear to Ezekiel: "My breath can resuscitate and propel an entire people forward into the new life that my breath inaugurates." For Israel, this meant that they would once again have life in their holy land and God would dwell with them, a witness to God's righteousness and justice among the nations.

The message of the story of Ezekiel and the Israelites in the context of Indigenous removal and white settlement in the United States is complex. On the one hand, the echoes of Indigenous confusion and anger and pain, their cries of being cut off from the land, seem to resonate with the cries of exiled Israel. On the other hand, it's possible that Indigenous people in the United States would more closely identify with the inhabitants that God's chosen people ran out of the Promised Land when they arrived. These complexities are important to explore, and there is some good, important scholarship on it, but I am going to focus on just three of the questions that I think Ezekiel's vision offers us for consideration in light of the Trail of Death.

The message of the story of Ezekiel and the Israelites in the context of Indigenous removal and white settlement in the United States is complex.

First, *whose bones can this story reveal to us?* In the Bible, these are the bones of Israel, God's chosen people. But whose dry bones fill the valleys of *this* land today? Do we see the bones of the children who perished along the Trail of Death (so ambivalently documented in a military escort's daily record with the words "a child died tonight")? Do we see the bones of those who survived the journey only to die in the unfamiliar land where they had been taken? Do we see the bones of the settler colonists who died throughout centuries of battles and wars waged to uphold the Doctrine of Discovery and secure Manifest Destiny for white Christians of European descent? The bones of my farming ancestors who moved onto the land

once stewarded by Indigenous peoples? Do we see the bones of the thousands of Indigenous children forced to attend boarding schools designed to exterminate their cultures and instill shame deep within them in the name of Christianity? Do we see our bones?

I am hesitant to claim these bones as my own and those of other white settlers because I am a part of the conquering empire, not the exiled minority nation. I wonder if I and people like me can claim this story as our own. While white settlers weren't conquered by the empire, there is certainly *spiritual* deadness among us that we must acknowledge and confront. The injustice that we perpetuate deadens us; our lack of faith in God to respond to our cries for justice deadens us. While we did not end up in the valley by the same means as the Israelites, can we claim the desperation and destitute circumstances of these dry bones? Can we claim a complete and total need for the breath of God to revive us as a people?

I say these are all our bones—both oppressed and conquerors. In Christ, God chooses not just Israel but all nations. God chooses not just the marginalized but also those who recognize their privilege and submit it to the cause of God's shalom.

The second question is this: *Can these bones live?* Here we return to the theme of uncomprehending discouragement that we saw from the disciples. I confess that during the pilgrimage, it was this—not my faith in God's sovereignty—that would have prompted me to respond as Ezekiel did, hesitant to assert that I, of all people, know whether or not these bones can live. So I ask myself now, When the Lord asks if the dry bones of both the conquerors and the oppressed can live, am I ready to say yes? To claim with conviction that God transforms from death to life, that God's very breath is the "impulse for life"?

I say yes. With God's breath, these bones can live.

Which leads me to my third question: *If these are all our bones and all our bones can live, can these bones live, together?* Even if God chooses to graciously bestow such breath upon oppressors and their descendants in the same way that God brings the oppressed to life, are we capable of coming together in our restored life? Can new communities be formed in the image of the living God?

The possibility of such reconciliation is the gospel; all things can be reconciled in Christ in a way that spans time and space. So I say yes; I must trust that these bones can live together. God's vision of full shalom life for all creation is big enough for that. I have to believe that.

The Trail of Death helped me begin to trust anew that God *does* resuscitate dry bones. Whether we have ended up in that valley by our own doing or have been forced there by oppressors, God shows up and wants to breathe deep into our withered bodies and dwell with us.

We are not called to breathe new life into the valley that white US imperialism has left in its wake. Only God's breath can do that. But we *are* called to cry out to our relational God—our God who loves justice. We are called to use the life that God has given us to plant seeds of God's shalom, to use this breath for everything that it is. I am called to believe that God is bigger than the sins of my ancestors and of this generation. I am called to acknowledge the Living God who has not abandoned us and who is not defeated by the powers of Death, though they yet seek domination.

God makes a way of life where there is none, where it seems improbable if not impossible. I need look no further than the hospitality and relationship that the Potawatomi people we met along our way offered us. For those of us who continue to benefit from the unholy conquest of this land and the subjection of its original stewards, new life is not a cover up but an opportunity. We have only to trust God's invitation to lament, respond to God's call to prophesy, and become aware of the breath of God's Spirit animating our bodies.

When we have worked ourselves into a pile of dry bones, when we have given in to the hopelessness of the tomb, the Triune God beckons us to remember and to believe. God beckons us to hope and trust that God's Spirit can and does move among us, breathing, reconciling, recreating. God beckons us to lend our whole selves to this faith and the action to which it leads us.[7]

About the author

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7 This sermon was first preached at Benton Mennonite Church in Benton, Indiana, on August 18, 2019.