



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

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5th Sunday in Lent

“Can These Dry Bones Live?”

The vision is of a valley of dry human bones. Make no mistake: this was the site of a battlefield. The defeat had been absolute and the prophet wonders whether Israel, the dry bones in the vision, could find life again. On another level, it served as a metaphor for the spirit of the Jewish people. From a place of exile, living under the rule of foreign powers, could the Jews find life again? Would they be able to rise up from the grave of despair? It's a question for the ages, including our own.

While in Hawaii, we watched a powerful film called the *Valley of Elah*. This is the valley where the boy David took on the Philistine giant, Goliath and prevailed, with nothing but a slingshot. The protagonist in the film is Hank, a retired U.S. army Sergeant who continues to run his life and hold personal values associated with his military identity. He lost his first son in the Iraq war, and now his second son, Mike, has just returned home on leave from serving in this same country.

Hank gets a call that Mike has gone AWOL. After returning on leave to America, he hadn't reported in for a couple of days. Hank leaves to go to the base and try to find his son. The grizzly news is awaiting him that his son's remains have been found in a field. The rest of the story concerns

the inner journey Hank is forced to make as he investigates the death of his son. He uncovers the truth that the day before his conversation with Mike in Iraq, his son was forced to run over an Iraqi child standing in the middle of the street while he was driving the patrol vehicle. It is army policy to stop for nobody for fear of suicide bombers. The father discovers that after suffering this trauma, his upstanding son snapped. He gained a reputation for torturing Iraqi prisoners. Then Hank discovers that it was Mike's own army buddies who killed his son. Suffering from post-traumatic stress syndrome, they had lost their humanity.

Near the end of the film, Hank remembers his last conversation with his son, when his son is still in Iraq. Mike is crying. “You have to get me out of here Dad”, he sobs. Hank, the father, responds by asking whether anybody is witnessing his son crying. Relieved that nobody is listening, he conveys to his son that he needs to grin and bear it. Be a soldier. Mike pulls himself together and ends the conversation quickly. Now, how does a father recover from all of this, including perhaps his own complicity in his son's death? The viewer witnesses his soul becoming a valley full of dry bones.

Many images stand out for me in the film, but the one that stays with me concerns the American flag. On his way to the military base to find his son, Hank notices a flag flying upside down. Being a patriot he stops his vehicle. He gives the fellow in charge of the flag, a refugee from El Salvador, a lesson about the meaning of an upside down flag. When you fly it upside down it's a distress signal. It means that the country is in real trouble and nobody has a clue what to do. After the investigation ends, Mike drives back home. A package has arrived from his son, before he died. It's addressed to his father. It's a tattered and torn American flag. Hank drives back to where he saw the flag flying upside down. He notices that the flag keeper has learned his lesson well. It's flying the right side up. He gets out of the car, takes the flag down, replaces it with the one his son gave him, turns it upside down, raises it, and then duct tapes the rope, so it will stay up there for a good long time.

Hank is making a statement. His own life, his values, his worldview, and his belief in the war, have all been turned upside down. He is signaling that both he and his country are in desperate need of help and he doesn't have a clue how to fix the problem. Everything that gave him life had dried up. It's a valley of dry bones as far as the eye can see. His very soul is on the line. And, of course, the filmmaker is suggesting that the soul of America is on the line as well.

The nation of Iraq itself is a field of dry bones. The prestigious

medical journal, *The Lancet*, reported that as of July 2006, 600,000 Iraqis had been killed. The highly respected British polling firm, *Opinion Research Business* confirmed this number in an independent audit. Both note that they had been very conservative in their estimates. Other organizations estimate that at least 1 million have been killed. This number starts from the date of the second invasion, not the first, and doesn't include the deaths caused by the economic sanctions in the previous decade, or the first invasion. So we can conservatively add 500,000 more Iraqis that have died as a direct result of these sanctions and the first invasion. The number of U.S. soldiers who have been killed stands at 29,320 since the second invasion. Twenty-nine thousand sons, like Mike. Between 8 and 10% of all U.S. soldiers who are fighting the war on terror are treated at the Landstuhl Medical Center in Germany for psychiatric or behavioral issues. So far, according to the medical director of the hospital they have treated 11,754 soldiers. Dry bones as far as the eye can see.

So wouldn't you think that this election would be all about Iraq? You'd think it would be all about getting out of this illegal war. You'd think it would be all about the question of whether the dry bones, which is the soul of the United States, could actually recover. But it's not. It's about universal health care and immigration policy and breaking the free trade agreements with Canada and the Mexico. All important issues, no question. But all the talk about Iraq has turned to how about how much

“progress” is being made. The Republican candidate is intent on finishing the war. The Democratic candidates are adopting the rhetoric of “progress”, because the public has already forgotten about Iraq. I don’t know if the valley of dry bones called Iraq can come back to life – we’ll have to ask Iraqis themselves – but I wonder about the soul of a nation that is so deep in denial. Can the soul of the great nation of the United States live? Thank goodness for filmmakers and the likes of Noam Chomsky and others who are trying to get their nation to come to terms with the tragedy of Iraq.

Let me take this down to the more personal level. We all know what it’s like to look out at our own live and see a valley of dry bones. When I was in Hawaii, I read a single book. I’m a big reader and a fairly fast reader at that. Admittedly, this was not a fluffy novel I tackled. It was a big, meaty non-fiction book. But I went deep into it. I gave myself time to reflect on it. I made notes in my journal. I shared what I was learning with Ann. It was a transformative experience. What I had done for these 10 days was enough. I had time to *feel* my life. I swear I heard the rattling of dry bones. I felt the breath of God coming back into my lungs and the disparate bones of my life being knit together by a deep, cosmic, synthetic power that was a movement of the Spirit.

Then in the warm breezes, under the swaying palm trees, I thought about what I was coming back to. I knew what was in my calendar for

the next six months. I had a list of at least 35 things that needed immediate attention. I would be hitting the ground running. My email box would have hundreds of messages. I would be exchanging the depth of experience I had enjoyed in Hawaii, for *breadth* of experience. I would be going from first thing in the morning until it was time for bed, and I wouldn’t be able to shut my mind off because it was over-stimulated. My meditation would be squeezed between appointments. I know that I am not alone. We have filled our lives to the absolute brim, but is it life, or is it a kind of grave?

When this depth dimension of life is absent from our lives, it is like declaring war on our souls. A feeling for the goodness of life goes AWOL. We deny ourselves authentic pleasure and then eventually forget what deep pleasure in life feels like. Then we find ourselves living in the midst of a valley of dry bones, but it’s the new normal. Stress and the constant stimulation of our adrenal glands leads to what Alvin Toffler called *Future Shock* 40 years ago. Well, the future is upon us. We lose ourselves in too much TV, too much E-mail, too much food, too much work, too many experiences, too much of everything. All of this, which we’ve come to believe is life, is actually serving to distract us from what we really want, which is to feel our lives and connect with our souls. And when we’re living out of connection with our soul, we lose both the capacity to shudder at horrors, like the war in Iraq, and the joys of deep intimacy with our family, our partners, and with the beauty of the earth.

Can these dry bones live? It's interesting that it is God who puts this question to Ezekiel, and the prophet's response indicates that he is not too sure about the answer. His response is to turn it back onto God. "You know, O God", says the prophet. You see, Ezekiel has run the flag up the pole. He's lost and the people are hopeless and he knows it. We may not know how to get ourselves out of this, but maybe we don't need to know. We just need to run the bloody flag of our lives upside down and grab a roll of duct tape.

The Spirit of God will get the distress signal. That's the promise of this story.

For those who wait upon the Spirit of God, help will arrive. When Mike calls home from Iraq, Hank tells him that he can hardly hear him. By the end of their conversation, it's clear that this is intended as metaphor. In fact, he couldn't hear his son at all. Couldn't hear his pain. Couldn't hear his son trying to tell him that this war was evil and that if he stayed a minute longer, the evil would claim him. When we've lost connection with Spirit, we can only hear the static of our culture – the narratives of nihilism and despair – confusing distraction and perpetual busyness with life itself.

But listen more closely. Listen deeply to the pain of your own life. It is the cry of your soul asking to be heard. Listen deeply to the yearning within your yearnings. Do not dismiss them. Do not tell yourself to grin and bear it. Follow them all the way back

to spring of life in the center of your soul. Listen as though your life depended on it. You may hear the sound of rattling, the presence of the spirit of God, knitting the scattered and fragmented bones of your life back together. You may feel the breath of the Spirit reentering your lungs, just when you thought death would have the final word. Rise up from the grave, friends. The Spirit of God is calling us back to life.