

Can These Bones Live?

We don't need to go back 2500 years, back when Ezekiel was dreaming dreams and seeing visions, to know something of dried up bones. We here know something of dried up bones because it is part of the story of Hawaii.

There are many of you, sitting right here in our pews, who know exactly what a dried up, dead, bleached white, pile of bones looks like.

You know because you have heard the stories, and you saw for yourselves, how the language, the dance, the truth of these islands was beaten down, stamped out, ostracized and humiliated right out of town.

Many of you saw the bitter fruit of missionaries who came to do good, and ended up doing very well indeed.

That old pile of bones that used to be a language heard in every house.

That old pile of bones that used to move so gracefully to the chanting rhythm.

That old pile of bones...

It seemed, not so very long ago, that if it wasn't dead, it would be soon.

But you, sitting in these pews, who saw and heard of its funeral, now see and hear its new life.

Not so very long ago, perhaps just a generation ago, those bones began to rattle and shake; sinews and muscle suddenly started to grow on those bones; arteries and veins and flesh ... and breath!

Dry old bones, no more.

And today, we sit and hear children speak the words of long ago; sing the songs, draw the pictures.

What was once Hawaii has been raised up to live again.

Old bones no more!

It is happening in our lifetime.

Who says *God* cannot or will not put flesh on old dead bones?

We see it ourselves!

And what of the old dead bones in your life? In mine?

Can *God*?

Will *God*?

Put flesh on these old dead bones?

God can.

God will.

Yet how many of the kupuna, the elders, went to their graves never seeing this new life?

How many waited and hoped but did not see?

There is a reading that, if I were in charge of the readings, would go right in between today's lesson about the bones and the story of Lazarus raised from the dead.

It is from the prophet Habakkuk.

It is about anger at God's delay, anger that we must sometimes be so terribly patient, and it is about hope; that no matter the delay, God's help will come.

Here is just a bit of what that prophet said:

"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry out to you 'Violence!' and you will not save? Look at the nations, and see!"

"Be astonished!"

"Be astounded!"

"I will stand at my watch post. I will watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint."

"Then the Lord answered me and said: 'write the vision. Make it plain on tablets, so that the runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time. If it seems delayed, wait for it. It will surely come. It will not be late.'"

Did you wonder how angry Martha and Mary are at Jesus today?

Lazarus is his best friend. Some even say he is the unnamed "Beloved Disciple" who laid his head on Jesus' chest during the last supper, the author of the *Gospel of John*.

Jesus, who healed the centurion's servant with just a word, who rushed to the house of Jiarus and bade his daughter to rise, who didn't hesitate to give the widow of Nain back her son; waits for days while Lazarus descends into death.

He waits. And waits some more.

Have you ever asked for something from *God* and heard only silence in reply?

Have you ever sought out *God's* kindness only to see darkness?

If you have, then you have a friend in Lazarus.

If you have, then you have a friend in Martha and Mary.

You have a friend in all those who watched the lifeblood of these islands drip into the sea for so many years.

Sometimes, *God* waits.

I don't know why.

I won't pretend to guess.

These are questions that are best pondered with reverence and awe. They are ultimate questions, indeed.

Jesus too must wait, in the garden, before his arrest.

During his torture; his humiliation.

And as he hangs to death on the tree, crying "Eli Eli lama sabathani!"

He waits.

We wait.

Yet the question becomes, "How do we accept this waiting?"

How do we make sense of the 25,000 presumed dead in Japan, of the slow nursing home decline of one of our saints of this church, Gertrude Tyau, of those lost in countries far away and those we have loved dearly and are now lost to death.

Isak Denison writes: "All sorrows can be born, if you put them into a story."

The story of sorrow can almost always be told only in hindsight.

Only having gone through it, and having gone through the uncertainty or loneliness or fear or brokenness, can it become part of the larger story of our lives, of the life of our community.

The story of our community here in Hawaii is the story of old dried bones coming to life again.

It is the story of Lazarus, raised again.

It is the story of Jesus, resurrected.

But it is also the story of waiting.

It is the story of old dried bones.

It is the story of dead friends, dead husbands and wives, even children.

It is the story of Christ crucified.

The lessons today take up, all at once, our story and God's story, rooted in unbearable sadness and overwhelming joy.

Can these bones live?

The lessons today, like a whirlwind, shout out to us that God is with us, right here, right now, in both joy and despair.

And that same whirlwind assures us that God is with us, even in the deaths we suffer during life, even in the death that comes when we each of us shut our eyes for the last time.

The extravagant promise that God makes to Ezekiel as he gazes over that valley of bleached white bones, the extravagant gift Jesus gives to Mary and Martha, returning beloved Lazarus to them from the grave, shout across the centuries to you and to me, insisting that we see, that we hear this singular truth:

Ours is not a God who rescues us from every danger or ill or evil.

Ours is a God who is with us in the midst of every danger and every ill and every evil.

I will end with this story.

A young man, in graduate school, got cancer. It was a particularly vicious cancer, very aggressive.

A woman sent him a letter saying she knew it was God's will that he be healed. All he had to do was believe.

She meant well.

But this young man felt that letter as a slap across the face; since, if he didn't get well, it meant he didn't believe enough.

This young man had a different sense of God, of suffering, and of story.

Too weak to respond to the lady, he asked his friend for help. Here's what he told his friend to write:

"I share your faith in the almighty power of God to heal and sustain us. There may be times though, when God's greatest miracle is not the miracle of physical healing, but the miracle of giving us strength in the face of suffering."

"Paul prayed that God would remove a thorn from his side, only to be told: 'My grace is enough for you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness.'

"Jesus prayed in the garden that he might not suffer, but suffer he must, and he faced that suffering with perfect faith."

"As I read the Bible, God's promise is to remove all our suffering in the next life, though not necessarily in this one. In this world, we will sometimes weep, suffer and die. But in the New

Jerusalem, 'God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor pain, for the former things are passed away.' (Rev. 2:14).

"I sincerely hope that if my cancer continues to grow, no one will see it as a failure of my faith in God, but that perhaps people can see me as faithful even if I die while I am young."

"I don't claim to understand God's will, but I do know that I am in God's hands, whether in life or in death."

As we near the end of our desert journey this Lenten Season, may the dry bones in our life begin to rattle, may the story of our faith, born out of our community, take on new life.

And may you, in your waiting, come to see that as you wait, God is with you, closer than your breath, waiting patiently with you.

Waiting patiently with me.

+amen.