

Peace in the Valley of Dry Bones: Priest Zechariah Meditates on Priest Ezekiel's vision

A sermon preached by Zac Klassen for Advent 2

Good morning,

As I prepared to preach on this second Sunday of advent, I approached this strange vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel 37 with some reluctance. My reluctance, I think, was twofold. On the one hand, I felt that the prophetic vision of this Israelite Priest is basically one of few that are ever preached on from his many other visions, and so to some extent it felt a bit overdone for me. On the other hand, I wrestled a bit with the thought: "it sure would be nice to preach on some more traditional advent texts, or at the very least to find a really good connection to one of the classic advent texts in Matthew and Luke." It was this last thought that led me to a process of exploration, where I began to meditate and pray and consider where there might be any natural connection between Ezekiel's strange vision of the valley of dry bones, and some of the advent texts of angelic visits and beloved characters. And then, like Ezekiel, the hand of the Lord came upon me – and I saw a vision of another priest, entering the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense, according to the custom of his priestly line. I speak of Zechariah, of course and what I offer you this morning is a short dramatic monologue in Zechariah's voice, as I've imagined his *inner monologue* just following his angelic visit and before he has left the temple that day. As you will discover, that inner monologue weaves in reflection on Ezekiel's vision and how it might relate to Zechariah's circumstances. My prayer is that we in our time can learn something from what I've imagined to be Zechariah's reflections on Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones in his own time. So, without further ado, I present to you Zechariah's inner monologue, following the departure of the Angel Gabriel prior to his exiting the temple. [And, given that this

is an inner monologue, I've recorded my voice so you can imagine what it was like for him to be unable to speak.]

Monologue Begins...

O God, has my prayer really been heard? Did I imagine all of what just happened: the angel at the right side of the altar of incense; the pronouncement not to fear and that Elizabeth will bear me a son; and that *my* son would be filled with your spirit and turn our people towards you? There must have been something in that incense that disoriented me. But then, why would I still be unable to speak? O God, have I gone crazy? I suppose I wouldn't have been the first priest to start to lose it. I learned long ago from the Rabbi's that opening yourself up to encounters with you, O Holy One, could lead one to become more than a little eccentric. I recall well my teachers talking about that Priest from Zaddok's line, old Ezekiel. "Careful, or you'll become like crazy old Zeke and start baking bread with human excrement as fuel." (Ezekiel 4:12) Thank goodness my priestly duties don't include prophetic sign-acts. [*Pause of recognition*] Oh please don't tell me you're going to start asking me to do crazy prophetic sign-acts! I'd prefer to stick to my incense rounds in the sanctuary, thanks.

Okay.... I'm having a full conversation with myself now – *I am going crazy*. [*Pause*] No, I've been at this long enough – I've heard enough stories to know the signs...this was really you, wasn't it? You really are up to something amazing. O God, I want to believe. I need to believe. There is too much at stake. Our people need a new beginning. We need peace. We need new life. We. Are. Dry. *Bone* dry. [*Pause – lightbulb moment*] Hey – there's an image from crazy old Zeke. The bones. The valley of dry bones. He may have been eccentric and a bit crazy, but this vision of his has always stuck with me, especially your question to him:

"Can these bones live?"

Can they, God? I mean, I used to think this story was just about our people's return from exile back to our land, but that happened centuries ago and I'm not so sure all the things you told Ezekiel to prophesy about have occurred. Yes, we've been placed back on our "own soil" (Ez. 37:14) since the long sojourn in Babylon, and yes, our people are alive *as a people*. But, despite all of this, I can't help but think that those haunting words of the whole house of Israel still apply to us today:

"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." (Ex. 37:11)

We may be in our own land, but our graves and the graves of so many other nations and peoples only multiply and stay closed. The powerful who are on their thrones continue to make war, create the conditions of exile, and push down the lowly, not only of our people but of other nations that you call yours as well (cf. Isa. 19:25). Our own have also become corrupted by the temptations of wealth and power and many from other nations kill and take land from others without remorse. Peace of any kind seems like a pipe dream.

So, what about that dramatic promise, LORD:

I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people (Ezekiel 37:12)

Are we just supposed to think of this as a metaphor? A metaphor, I'll have you know, is hardly comforting when people are struggling to put food on the table or are being profiled and persecuted by government powers. And what about that other, great promise, that one that Ezekiel and our other Prophets echo:

"I will put my spirit within you." (Ezekiel 37:14) [*huffs and pauses*]

[*Cautiously Hopeful*] Wait...what was that you said about my son – that he will be filled with the Spirit? That he will "make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Lk. 2:17)? [*Cautiously excited*] Could this really be the start of your newness oh, God? Is this the beginning of the bones

coming together – is this when you will now clothe our dry bones with flesh and skin; is this when your breath will create us anew, just as you created with your breath in the beginning? As this son of mine grows within Elizabeth, nurtured by her body and enlivened by your Spirit—bones and flesh coming together—could this be a part of the fulfillment of your words, spoken long ago through Ezekiel? *[Drops to knees]* Oh, may it be so, Lord. May it be so.

[Standing up] I've got to tell someone. Oh. Right. I can't. What do I do now...? If I walk out that door and see the people, they are going to wonder why I took so long and I can't tell them. *[Thoughtfully looks at hands]* Hmm...hand gestures might be tricky, but I can try. *[waves hand dejected]* Ah, who am I kidding! I guess I'll just have to face the music and then wait, won't I....wait in *my own* valley of silence, praying, listening, and watching for signs that your new creation is growing, however slowly, however imperceptibly it might be happening. The angel did talk, after all, about things being “fulfilled in their time.” As hard as it will be, I guess I'll have to choose to see this time of silence as a time of *preparation and readiness*. After all, you said my son would prepare us for your arrival. Will I even live to see your arrival, Lord? I'm already old. Yet, even if I do die before I see your salvation, I'll do what I can to prepare my heart for that great day, Lord! *[Impatiently]* Oh, but what about the people outside? I can take this time as a time to prepare but I can't exactly prophesy to them, telling them to prepare for all of this! If only *I could* imitate Ezekiel in performing some kind of visible sign-act to declare to them that something amazing *[slowly]* has *[slowly]* happened....*[Pause]* Oh. My silence *is* the sign-act, isn't it? I can't talk until this has been fulfilled – all I can do is wave my hands like a bumbling fool. I might look more like crazy old Zeke yet. *[Pause]*

[With recognition] So, the waiting in silence is part of the point, isn't it? So many voices around us make promises – so many people claim to have the answers to our deepest longings or

claim to speak peace over our worst fears. Gabriel silencing me wasn't just a punishment, was it? You want me to be a sign for others too – to wait and watch, listening for you in the silence, if we are to find peace; to wait and watch if we are to notice your signs of new creation beginning and believe. Well, if that's the case, then I guess it's time to go outside and watch and wait – watch and wait with Elizabeth – watch and wait with my people. Before I do, though, I'll light the incense and pray: O God, may the tender fragrance of this incense linger on me as I leave your sanctuary. May its sweetness be in its own way a prophetic sign-act, declaring through the senses here in this holy place that you have spoken and will act to save us (Ez. 37:14).