

Fifth Sunday in Lent: Ezekiel 37:1-14

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 round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy 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. 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.’

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’

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It seems as if we have this standing appointment with our doctor every day at 2 o’clock in the afternoon; not with our primary care physician, necessarily, not even with one of our specialists the next town over. Instead, at 2pm, every day, we all have an appointment with Dr. Amy Acton, the Director of the Ohio Department of Health, who stands next to Governor DeWine, in delivering what is usually considered *not* “good news,” to say the least. And yet, I envision her speaking to a different kind of valley overwhelmed with dry bones, because, quite honestly, it feels as if we are in a state of exile from normalcy, from life as we once knew it. Dr. Acton has to find a way to convince us of the seriousness of this virus, while, also, making sure we are not thoroughly engulfed in sheer panic. She must find some way of instilling even the slightest bit of hope for us, to make us believe day after day, no matter how dismal her report may be, that it will most certainly improve soon enough.

However, that is not the only parallel I see between Dr. Acton and those prophets who were called upon to proclaim brutal honesty, and yet, evoke just as much inspiration to God’s children, who wonder if it can possibly get any worse than this! Except, before that, God had (and has) this holy tendency to call such prophets from rather bleak circumstances for themselves, and Dr. Acton is no different. I share with you a portion of an interview with her from *The Vindicator* newspaper of Youngstown, from where she, at one time, called home.

*Abused, abandoned, neglected, working a gig life before there was a name for it, figuring it out on her own and making up rules as she needed to. She did this not just for her, but also for her younger brother. And it started at age 3. “My parents met at a theater party for YSU*

*[Youngstown State University] and got pregnant unexpectedly...” is how Amy starts. It does not get better for a long, long time. It was the 1960s. Her mom was an artist; dad talked mom into marriage; a younger brother came in; and then came divorce when Amy was 3.*

*“It got out of control. Custody [back then] always went to the mom. My dad tried to get custody of us,” she said. “Out of control” meant 18 or so homes in her first 12 years scattered around the North Side – mom, brother, Amy and many, many pets. One place literally was a basement – bare walls, sump pump, boxes and a bed.*

*More troublesome than the nomadic lifestyle were the men in mom’s life. Amy calls them a “cast of characters.” At one point in childhood, they moved to California. Mom got into a fight with whoever was the man at that time. So they traveled back home. They got as far as Nebraska. Mom got a job to earn money; she met a guy; she put her kids – age 8 and 5 – on a bus alone back to here to live with relatives. Three months later, mom, too, was home, and the cycle continued. “I have so many crazy stories...spent so much time being scared as a kid, but also navigating the adult world,” Amy said.*

*One guy finally hung around for marriage. That’s when Amy’s life got worse. She was between age 9 and 12. The guy had accusations of molestation events in his past, she said. With his abuse of Amy, there was finally enough evidence that officials were called in and criminal charges were filed. It was winter, and the family was living in a tent in a campground outside Youngstown. “I was lucky that it got bad enough, because it got me out of there.”*

*She was finally able to move in with her dad and his relatives. Her Liberty life kicked in, and it would be a better life. Money was always tight. But they were safe and there was food. She eventually would become Liberty homecoming queen – Class of 1984. But no one ever knew her story.*

*“It’s hard to tell people about this because it makes kids uncomfortable,” she said about her younger years. “So you just keep it all in.” She’s more at ease talking about it as an adult. But the tears still come as if it were yesterday. Her dad, Jerry, died a few years ago. Her brother lives in Colorado. She hasn’t seen or heard from her mom since a day in court after that long-ago arrest. “In the courthouse after they were charged, I went to give her a kiss, and she just turned her cheek away. That was the last time I ever saw her.” Out on bond, mom and her husband skipped town and have not been heard from since.*

*Amy’s medical interest grew from a hospital visit as a child. She wanted to be nice and nurturing like the staff. In that dank North Side basement, she heard on radio about a medical school attached to Youngstown State University. It became her obsession.<sup>1</sup>*

I will only speak for myself, but I believe we have all benefited from that “obsession” that grew out of the most dismal valley of horror for a young woman, who should have never been forced to witness such a landscape of awful humanity. And now, this woman, a hero, quite honestly; stands before us every day at 2 o’clock wanting so desperately to convince us that such a valley of dry bones surrounding us can, and will, most certainly live.

Yes, there are some discrepancies trying to tie in the story of Ezekiel with a woman in 21<sup>st</sup> century science. For starters, we are *not* exiled from our homeland as the Israelites were in the time of the Hebrew prophet. Not to mention, I have absolutely *zero* evidence of Dr. Acton’s faith background. But the truth is, and maybe I shouldn’t type this out...I don’t care; because I most firmly believe God can work through doctors, nurses, medical technicians, respiratory therapists,

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<sup>1</sup> Franko, T. (2019, August 31). State health director’s passion come from Youngstown. *The Vindicator*. Retrieved from <https://vindyarchives.com>

and plenty, plenty more, who believe science can help us for the good. I do not believe, for a second, that there is any kind of social or theological distance from God and the overwhelming field of science itself. I believe we can worship God and listen to practical medical advice that can very well save the lives God cherishes just as much as our own.

And no, we are not exiled from our homes, but it still feels we are in this valley of hopelessness, of such near-suffocating despair, wondering if the vista of Resurrection is too far for us to reach again (even though we tell ourselves over and over, “This will not go on forever!”). It feels as if we are in a valley of unstoppable dryness, desperately thirsting for life to just get back to even basic normalcy, that we so covet now more than ever before. But leave it to a woman who has most certainly been to absolute hell and back, to convince us even in this most fearful valley; that there is a way out. We *will* get through this together. We will get through this with the support of family and friends, our sisters and brothers in Christ, doctors and nurses, and yes, God working through them all! And for Dr. Amy Action, for all those who remain committed to the care of us all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!

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Finally, a word about the chosen Hymn of the Day, “All Who Love and Serve Your City” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* Hymn 724): that it may serve as a way for us to collectively give thanks for those who continue to work on our behalf. The tune may not be the most uplifting pick-me-up style of music, but it may best encapsulate the emotions that many workers are enduring during this time, from the grocery store to the hospital to day care centers. They are most certainly bearing their fair share of “daily stress.” And yet, may their collective humbling, selfless work, inspire us to see that, in our own community, “The Lord is there,” too.

All who love and serve your city,  
all who bear its daily stress,  
all who cry for peace and justice,  
all who curse and all who bless,

In your day of loss and sorrow,  
in your day of helpless strife,  
honor, peace, and love retreating,  
seek the Lord, who is your life.

In your day of wrath and plenty,  
wasted work and wasted play,  
call to mind the word of Jesus,  
“I must work while it is day.”

For all days are days of judgment,  
and the Lord is waiting still,  
drawing near a world that spurns him,  
offering peace from Calvary’s hill.

Risen Lord! shall yet the city  
be the city of despair?

Come today, our Judge, our Glory;  
be its name, "The Lord is there!"

["All Who Love and Serve Your City" from Lenoir-Rhyne University, an ELCA-affiliated institution, in Hickory, North Carolina, during a Service of Commemoration of the Tenth Anniversary of September 11, 2001](#)