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Portrait of an Apology: Medicine for Dry Bones By Matt Hook, with thanks to Rev. Grace Imathiu

My friend Grace Imathiu from Mairu, Kenya, once told me an African proverb that says when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. I've thought of this when parents fight because often it is the kids that get caught in the middle. I think of this proverb when I read the papers about leaders fighting for power. It's the ordinary citizens who suffer. When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers.

I live every day with the underlying assumption that as a species, as a race, we live in brokenness. We fight. The need for an apology is because of the brokenness of the relationships we live in, day in and day out. At work, at home, with friends, with family. We live in exile from those people, and many of us are living in exile from God, even many of us who know the Gospel of Jesus' love. Either we're one of the two elephants, or we're like the grass beneath. And even if we stop collecting debts, even if we listen, even when we forgive those around us, we still feel like we're left...broken.

The Bible speaks to us today, even though it was written thousands of years ago, even though it is largely about the little nation of Israel. Throughout history, to this day, Israel has always been broken. Surrounded by world powers of Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Syria, Greece, and Rome, little Judea sits right in the middle of the warpath of elephants. Whichever of the two giants won, Israel was part of the spoils. When two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. Listen to the experience of Ezekiel the priest, who was broken in the midst of this type of crisis:

Ezekiel 37:1 "The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. 2 He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. 3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know." 4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! 5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. 6 I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.'" 7 So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. 8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. 9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" 10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. 11 Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' 12 Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. 13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 14 I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'"

King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had captured Judah and the "who-is-who" of Judea are exiled as slaves to Babylon. Ezekiel was among that crowd of refugees in Babylon's refugee camps. You could compare it to the holocaust or the terrible plight of millions in Africa today. What do you say when you're the priest and it

looks like evil is winning?

Talk about a tough assignment: he has to become a prophet...to a graveyard! Talk about a dead end assignment! Have you ever felt like you knew God wanted you to do something but you knew you were the one in exile, broken yourself?

Remember Ezekiel 37. Ezekiel tells us that at such times when YOU are the one experiencing exile, whether it's in your personal life, your spiritual life, or your community, guess who shows up? God! The Word of God says take heart because God can turn a time of hostility into a time for hearing God loud and clear, and the portrait of an apology begins. When it's elephants fighting, it's time to go back to the drawing board, back to what's essential, back to asking basic questions, hard questions, even embarrassing questions. No more back burner.

Guess what happens to Ezekiel in exile? Ezekiel the priest becomes Ezekiel the prophet. His eyes are opened to see an alternative reality from exile's reality. He glimpses that the kingdom of God is at hand. His tongue is loosened in exile so he can speak courageously of a new day a-coming. His life is liberated to act and live out as a child of God regardless of all the mean-spirited, negative messages of exile.

This priest-turned-prophet is carried by the spirit to a valley, the valley of bones. Now we don't know exactly where this place is. Some say it is the Jezreel Valley, others say it's Megiddo Plains, still others say it's the Valley of Armageddon. Wherever this place is, one thing is sure. Chances are you've been there. And some of us here today are in the middle of it right now. This place is too familiar for comfort. You see, this bone-valley place might be symbolic of relationship.

Is it not tragic that these bones could represent *family* relationships that seemed beyond mending. Sisters and brothers no longer talk. Children and parents are estranged beyond repair. Hearts are shattered into a thousand pieces. Too much water passed under the proverbial bridge. It might be that this bone-valley place represents relationships between *peoples and races and nations*. So much brokenness and bitterness in our history. It is difficult to see any forgiving, any trusting, any reconciliation in the near future. Or this bone-valley place might be symbolic of the *community of faith* called our church.

When you know too much and God asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I want to say "Whaddaya mean "Can the bones live?!" Of course not! They're dead! They're dry! It's madness! But look at what Ezekiel does...when God asks him if these bones can live, Ezekiel doesn't just go with the world as he sees it, he shifts it to God: (He's wiser than I am). "O Lord, you alone know." Lord, you alone know every nuance about my situation.

DARE TO SEE WHAT'S NEXT FROM GOD'S VIEW. When you shift your view to God's view, you begin to see the world as God sees it. And then you begin to work from what God knows. So I ask you today, in your own exile: Do you dare see your situation through God's eyes? Do you dare visit your valley...with God?

And notice: Ezekiel didn't wait until the bones were healthy. He began right where he was, today, and preached. Begin today. He basically says "Lord God, let's not work from what I know; let's work from what you know. Lord God, you know. Lord God, you know and I want to walk by faith in what you know. I'll walk by faith and not by my sight. Lord God, you know, you lead. I'll follow. So whether these bones can live, Lord God, you know."

The Spirit of God was upon Ezekiel, Ezekiel the medicine for dry bones is prophesying. Ezekiel, the medicine for dry bones is the proclamation of the Word of God. Ezekiel, prophesy to these bones. Preach to these dry bones the Word of God. Dare to see a new possibility, Ezekiel. Get excited about what-*can-be* before it is. Dare to preach the impossible, Ezekiel. Preach that dry bones can come together, muscles, flesh, skin, breath, life, faith. Preach, Ezekiel. Oh, Ezekiel began preaching to the dry bones. Oh, you should have seen him moving from one side of the valley to the other, preaching life to dry bones, preaching a future to a dead-end situation.

Some might say wasting his breath, but Ezekiel was creating a portrait out of something like an apology. Prophesying to dry bones. Notice we're not told how long he prophesied, minutes: hours, days, weeks, months, years. It does not matter. You see, when you believe in God's presence, *you continue to believe regardless of what is around you*. You continue to be faithful. Being faithful is for the long haul. Faith is not easy. Faith is not on any fast food menu. Believing is not for wimps, it takes endurance and perseverance.

But then as he preached, shhhhhhh, movement, rattling in the valley, bones moving. Toebone connecting to the foot bone, foot bone connecting to the leg bone, leg bone connecting to the hip bone, the neck bone, the head bone, prophesying. And now turn to the wind and prophesy to the wind. And breath came into them and they lived and they stood on their feet—a mighty army.

What a story! What an incredible story! A story that has been repeated in history over and over again. Over and over again in our history, God has opened somebody's eye and loosened a tongue of a warrior who in dire circumstances of exile, and that person saw an alternative kingdom called the kingdom of God.

Remember Martin Luther King, Jr., preaching to a dry-bone situation about a dream. When he preached his dream, it seemed absolutely impossible that sons of former slaves and former slave owners would ever sit down together at the table of brotherhood. Is that an impossible Ezekiel vision? Or that God wants to create medicine for dry bones right here? That this spot, this church, could be a place that people come to from all over to receive healing and blessing and purpose for their lives? Because this environment of faith, and hope, and love for living would create a beautiful portrait of God for them?

Dare to believe the impossible and live as if though it has already come. Live on earth as a citizen of God's kingdom. I don't know which side of the valley you are on in this season of your life. You may be the grass or you may be one of the elephants. Whichever side you're on, be encouraged. If you are a bone in the valley of dry bones, God has not forgotten you. You are still His, and there is hope. Or you may be the one God has called to a dead-end, exile-type situation, and you're tired. His Word comes "hang in there and live as a citizen of the kingdom of God. I will bring my people up from their graves. I will bring you home. My Spirit will be in you, and you will live. And one day every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord.

Let us pray. In my valley, O God, bring your life-giving Word that I might have hope. Create in me the artwork of what is not yet seen. Pour your Holy Spirit in me that I might not grow weary or give up. Put me back together again. Create in me your heart. Breathe in me Your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.