

Dry Bones

By Janet Borggren, 19 February 2017

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.”

William Butler Yeats wrote those words in 1919.

The world was in disarray after World War I, when an estimated 17 million soldiers and civilians died. Another 20 to 50 million died in the flu epidemic of 1918. And the Russian Revolution and civil unrest in Yeats' native Ireland threatened additional chaos. Society was breaking down. The center was not holding, and anarchy was loosed upon the world.

Those lines have been quoted many times in the decades since they were written. Chinua Achebe used the phrase “Things Fall Apart” as the title for her novel about the disintegration of order in Nigeria. Elyn Saks's autobiography about her own mental illness is titled “The Center Cannot Hold.” In January, “The National” (a news outlet in the Middle East) published an article about the political situation in the United States using the headline “Things fall apart when the center cannot hold as Trump takes office.”

As we look at the world around us, it is easy to despair. Families fall apart. Violence walks the streets of our city, our country is divided, and it seems that everywhere there are wars and rumors of war.

Things are falling apart.

Yeats looked at the world and saw chaos. TS Eliot looked at the same situation and saw a wasteland:

“What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,
You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
And the dry stone no sound of water.”

This feeling of desolation is not unique to our times. Listen to the lament of the prophet in Jeremiah 8:20-22

Harvest is past, summer is ended, and we are not saved. For the brokenness of the daughter of my people I am broken; I mourn, dismay has taken hold of me. Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has not the health of the daughter of my people been restored?

The world is a mess. And the world has always been a mess. Some of us have been reading the chronological Bible. So far we are not even 2 months in, and we have encountered rape, murder, lying, betrayal, incest, drunkenness, and slavery. And that's just among God's chosen people.

When we look around at our fallen world, there is reason to despair. I don't know where you are this morning, but I do know that many are struggling. Some have serious health issues. Others are struggling with unemployment. Or they worry over family members who are struggling with addiction. Or they have watched loved ones die. Some days, we are struggling to hold it all together. Some days it seems as if we are living in a wasteland.

The prophet Ezekiel brings us a message of hope. As we think about this vision of the dry bones, there are three thoughts I want to leave you with today.

First of all, it may feel as if we are abandoned, but God is with us in the wasteland.

In Verse 1, the scripture says:

The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley.

The valley was full of dead bones, but God was there.

One of the names for Jesus is Immanuel, meaning "God with us." He is present during the worst of times....even when we do not feel that presence.

As followers of Christ, we are called to provide that ministry of presence. We visit the sick. We serve food to people who are sad. We sit by the bed of the dying.

Anne Lamott offers the following advice for people who are experiencing the wasteland: To summon grace, say, "Help!" And then buckle up. Grace won't look like Casper the Friendly Ghost; but the phone will ring, or the mail will come and you will get your sense of humor back.

WE claim the promise of Psalm 24: "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Point #1: God is with us.

Point #2. it's OK to let go.

We spend so much time struggling to hold it all together. We are afraid to let go because things will fall apart...and we will be left in chaos.

The good news is that God is not afraid of chaos. He created the world out of chaos. He does his best work in the midst of chaos.

In the words of Ezekial, "as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them." The dry bones fell apart, and God knit them together.

Two more thoughts about letting go.

Sometimes a bone is setting wrong. To fix the problem the doctor needs to break the bone so it can heal straight. Sometimes we need to let go because we're trying to patch together something that's not growing straight. When we let go, God can create something new.

Secondly,

Sometimes we are simply exhausting ourselves with worry. A few years ago I was talking to a friend. She said, "My brother-in law lost his job. His mother is dying. My sister is frantic with worry. I don't know how to fix it." The bad news is, you can't fix it. That's God's job. Your job is to pray, and visit, and bring food, and offer to babysit. But that's all you have to do. You can let go of that overwhelming burden of being responsible for the results.

We claim the promise in Jeremiah 29:11 For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

Point #1: God is with us

Point #2: It's OK to let go.

Point #3: God can breathe new life into us and renew us.

Ezekiel prophesied, and God breathed life into the dead bones and they became alive. And God said: I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.

Our Gospel reading tells the good news that Jesus heals: Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

God can heal whatever situation you are in. We are not guaranteed freedom from physical pain and troubles. We will not all be cured. But our souls can be healed. Jesus can remove our burdens and bring us comfort and peace. We can be renewed.

We claim the promise from Isaiah 40:31:

but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

Yeats never discovered that hope. TS Eliot, on the other hand, did become a Christian. His poem "The Four Quartets" describes the path from despair to new life. It ends with a quote from the 14th century saint Julian of Norwich,

"All things shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."