

Sermon for Sunday, April 6, 2014 (Lent 5) Ezekiel 37:1-14 "The Walking Dead"

According to a recent article in the New York Times, a group of scientists are attempting to clone extinct creatures by using the DNA stored in their fossilized bones. Some attempts have been made in the past to do this with woolly mammoths, to little avail, but this particular group is looking to return the passenger pigeon, which became extinct in 1914, to the earth. They are taking samples from stuffed birds, from bones of birds, from feathers, in hopes that they can find enough genetic material to actually restore this once-plentiful breed to life.

Stewart Brand, an environmentalist and futurist whom some of you may remember from his 70's era "Whole Earth Catalog," is the prime mover behind the effort to restore the bird. The passenger pigeon once was so plentiful it flew in great darkening swarms in our skies, but it was hunted into extinction. The scientific hope is that scientists who are sequencing the genome of the passenger pigeon can introduce its unique genetic material into the "genetic scaffolding" of a closely related species, the band-tailed pigeon. That's the simple version of what they will attempt to do. In reality, it's a lot more complicated and way beyond my ability to explain it.

But beyond the "cool" factor of a project like this, why would you do it? Why bring back a species that has gone down to the dust?

Is it an attempt to restore things to the way they were before we humans killed off the species, to restore the balance of nature? Is it something we do just to say we can do it? Is it an attempt to model what we wish for, that we can bring back our beloved pets who have died, or even – echoes of zombie movies – those members of our human family whom we have lost?

Echoes of the tv show "The Walking Dead" ring in our ears. Talk – with tongue planted firmly in cheek – of "the zombie apocalypse" come to the fore. Images of the Game of Thrones' White Walkers cause us to shudder.

Because, on some level, the thought of reviving that which is dead is more than a little creepy.

And science backs this up. Genetic experiments to create hybrids or to restore extinct species by injecting genetic material of a long-gone creature into a living ovum have led to some horrible results – chimeras, they're called, where you don't know quite what you've ended up with, but you know it isn't good.

Even seemingly successful cloning efforts such as Dolly the sheep have shown problems. Dolly died very prematurely. It all feels just a little bit creepy and not right, doesn't it?

So when the prophet Ezekiel speaks of breathing new life into dry bones, it evokes images that disturb us on a visceral level. A step beyond Halloween, a step beyond the Grateful Dead's dancing skeletons, into something darker.

And a single question from God, posed to the prophet, puts the finest point on it: "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel punts. "O Lord God, you know." In other words, "don't ask me, you're scaring me here."

It's a good question. Can these bones live? These bones of our dry, unloving hearts. Our zombie faith, unclothed in the flesh that means energy and life and action. Our walking as if dead, because we have disconnected from the source of divine energy in whom we live and breathe and have our being?

Can these bones live?

To get at what Ezekiel was wrestling with, you have to know a little of what Ezekiel lived through. As OT scholar Margaret Odell says, "From the time Ezekiel first began to speak in 592 BCE, the people's long history of rebellion against God and now also against Nebuchadnezzar has sealed their fate. Destruction was inevitable, and by 586 BCE Jerusalem lay in ruins. Whether we are to think of this battlefield as Nebuchadnezzar's doing or God's, we are to remember a broken covenant and unspeakable loss."

A pretty dark picture, right? Everything in ruins, because the people forgot their God and fought against a superior earthly foe, Nebuchadnezzar. The bones of their nation, the bones of their temple, the bones of their souls were as dry and

scattered as the bones of their dead. And it was as inconceivable that the nation of Israel could be brought back to life as it was that Ezekiel could command those bones back into an enlivened breathing state.

Ezekiel's dream vision, those bones, sound like something from beyond the farthest side of beyond. Gray, sere, dead, broken, lifeless. But here is the thing: it is not merely a collection of bones of a single body, a single person, it is a collection of collections of bones. It is the bones of the entire community. Because it is not one dead person. It is a dead community, a dead nation. How can a community be brought back from the dead, like Lazarus from the tomb? How can these bones live?

How can something even more dramatic, more intense, than healing occur?

Consider this: maybe healing a nation is the first thing that happens, before bringing a single person back to life? Might it be that structuring the bringing back of a whole species must precede the cloning of a single bird? Because, after all, the strength of a whole community supports the health and regeneration of each individual within it.

Here's what the wonderful poet and essayist Wendell Berry says about that:

"I believe that the community - in the fullest sense: a place and all its creatures - is the smallest unit of health and that to speak of the health of an isolated individual is a contradiction in terms.¹

We can't revive a single passenger pigeon...it would fade and die alone. We have to bring back the whole species for it to thrive. There is no health for the individual without the health of the whole community. For Israel, that means that the nation has to change if it is to come to life again. The breath of God, the wind of the Spirit that will animate those dry bones and put flesh on them and bring them back to life and health, whooshes over the whole of that bone field, not just one or two or a select dozen. It is the whole community that must come back to life. This makes Ezekiel's work larger in scale. He has to prophesy to the bones, all the bones. He has to announce that God will lay sinew and flesh on the bones, draw them together. And then God's breath, the wind from the four corners of the earth, will enter into the community of gathered bones...and they shall be restored.

If Ezekiel is bringing this strange fever dream message to the shattered nation of Israel, he is also bringing the same message to our broken world today. And the thing we cannot forget is that God's healing is not simply an action applied to an individual, it is wholeness brought to the whole of the world. Because simply fixing one of us isn't enough. All must find healing and restoration to life. God's breath is too big for just one person, but it is big enough to heal an entire nation, an entire world.

This isn't *The Walking Dead*, with creepy half-alive zombies meandering around the post-apocalyptic landscape. It is *The Rising Living*, a restored and shalom-filled world where the health of each is understood to be a part of the health of the whole community.

That is the promise of Easter to come: not only Lazarus raised from the tomb, not only Jesus risen from the dead, not one by one...no, because God's love and desire for us to be fully whole and well means that God's love can and must be for the whole of Creation to be whole and well. And that means that when we seek God's forgiveness for our own failings, when we crave God's grace to fix us, we have a responsibility to see God's healing for all. So we pray today for a restored world, where we are all one with the One who made us, where we are indelibly marked by the scars of our journey but equally visibly well. Let God's breath fill each of us because God's breath fills all of us. Let these bones live.

Amen.

¹ **Wendell Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays* (pg. 146, Health is Membership)**