

“Breathing New Life”  
Ezekiel 17:1-14

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Last October I was in Phoenix with a small group of writers. We turned the city into a writing retreat and spent time in different places around the city reflecting, sharing, and practicing different writing exercises. One afternoon we went to the Phoenix Art Museum. We were told to spend time walking around the museum alone, to find a painting that stood out or connected with you, and to write about it.

The Phoenix Art Museum is a pretty big museum, three stories full of modern and contemporary art from around the world. I walked and walked and walked but it felt like everything was equally impressive and stood out in the same kinds of ways. On the second floor there was a tiny room tucked behind two larger rooms. This section of the museum was full of western art from the earth 20<sup>th</sup> century, rancheros, cowboys, and lots of landscapes. None of it was really my style, but I kept wandering back to the edge of the tiny room, and finally I walked in.

In this room were a dozen landscape paintings of desert rock formations. It should have been called the Red Rock room because each canvas was consumed with giant red rocks, tumbleweeds, and a lone tree or two. In the middle of it all was a painting that took my breath away, “Sweeping Clouds” by Ed Mell. This painting had the exact same elements of all the other paintings but instead of focusing on the rocks down below, it focused on the clouds. They took up almost the whole canvas and if you stared long enough, the clouds seemed to move. Instead of being defined by reds and browns, this painting had dozens of shades of blues swirling together in the sky.

On its own, it is a beautiful painting, but it is particularly stunning in the context of the other paintings in the room. This artist was offered the same view as every other artist, but approached it from a whole new perspective. His perspective took him out of the bleak, dry, desert floor and lifted the viewer into the clouds - soaring above and swirling with possibility. He was able to see what the others missed. He transformed that landscape from a desert valley I would be afraid to get lost in, to a sweeping sky that makes me want to lose track of time staring at the clouds and finding new shapes and movement. It doesn't mean the desert below isn't still a part of the painting. It is. But it doesn't dominate. The landscape painting becomes a skyscape, helping us to envision how even something as predictable and basic as a desert painting can be approached in a new way and offer opportunities to see things in new light.

I remembered sitting with this painting as I read the passage from Ezekiel where he describes the valley of the dry bones. Ezekiel was a young prophet who was part of the group of Israelites who were exiled from their land and forced to live in Babylon. Their lives were upended. They could no longer work the way they had always worked. They were no longer in close proximity to their neighbors and loved ones. They could no longer go to temple to worship together. They felt alone, isolated, and abandoned. During this forced isolation and exile, Ezekiel has an incredible dream where Israel is represented as a valley of dry bones where there is only death and destruction as far as the eye can see. In the dream God comes and offers Ezekiel a different perspective. God invites Ezekiel to imagine life coming back into the bones, dried up bones returning to living bodies with breath moving through them.

This dream is not a denial of the painful reality the Israelites are living through, but it helps them change their perspective. It shifts their focus from what is right in front of them to looking toward the future - of envisioning a time when their community is liberated and they can

imagine new life breathing through them again. It helps them imagine a way beyond the isolation and loneliness and despair that they are currently in to remember there is still a future, and that God's spirit is already at work to make that future one that is healing and life-giving.

This passage reminds us of our ability to hold multiples truths at once. It is true that this time we are living in reminds us of a desert valley where nourishing oases feel far away and out of sight. A time when each of us is quarantined in our own homes and grasping for connection and normalcy, where many of us worried about family and coworkers and neighbors who are ill or at risk of becoming ill, a time when all of us feel a weight of helplessness as we watch the pandemic unfold and feel like we are unable to do anything except stay out of the way. This is our present reality, and the valley of dry bones feels like an apt image.

It is also true that this present reality is not forever. It is true that vaccines will be tested and distributed, that medicines will help bring healing to those that are sick, that schools and businesses will reopen and communities will gather together again. The future that we dream into being can be one where things don't return as they once were but perhaps are improved: where we are more community minded, where we value our interdependence and leverage it for the care and justice of all of our neighbors, where we work to eliminate old issues of inequity and access so that in times of crisis fewer people are vulnerable or put at greater risk than others.

It is also true that God is here with us in the isolation and the fear and the death. God is with us now, and God will be with us in the future. God is at work helping to breathe new life into these coming months, that we might find ourselves out of crisis and moving toward thriving, healthy communities and nations. God is at work helping us to shift our perspective, to lift us out of the dry valley and toward the beauty waiting above and beyond us. May Ezekiel's dream for the Israelites breathe new hope into us today. May we hold on to an image that acknowledges our

present reality but makes way for imagining a future where the breath of life has returned to places we feared were too long gone to be saved. With God's help and God's holy spirit holding us together, may it be so. Amen.