

The *Hot* Word from the Bible
“Dem Bones”
Ezekiel 37:1-14 July 19, 2009

Fred Craddock is the Walter Cronkite of Disciples’ preachers—the most trusted man in our denomination. I would bet that Dr. Craddock has preached at East Dallas, Christian Church at some point in the last 50 years, so some of you may know him.

Though Disciples born and bred, Fred is in demand as a speaker and preacher in many other traditions, too. Because of that, he has earned a lot of frequent flyer miles traveling around the country to his various speaking engagements.

On one trip he tells about a strange experience in which he found himself in an aisle seat, sitting next to a rather loquacious woman in the middle, and a well-dressed businessman in the window seat. As the plane took off, the three of them exchanged brief pleasantries, then settled into the business of handling travel through reading, writing, thinking, sleeping, etc.

Craddock was reading over the sermon he was going to preach at his destination. They had been sitting in comfortable silence for at least an hour when the woman next to him punched him and whispered, “Look over here!” Craddock looked over at the man in the window seat. He didn’t notice anything unusual, so he whispered back, “What’s the matter?”

“Look at him! He’s perfectly still! I think he’s dead,” said the woman.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Craddock, even though he did see that the man’s eyes were unnaturally wide open and he was perfectly still. A little concerned, Craddock stared at the man’s face to see if he could see any movement, any blinking, twitching, anything—but there was nothing.

He turned to the woman and said, “Why don’t you punch him?”

“I’m not going to punch him because he might fall on me. I’m going to move to another seat.” Then, after a pause, she said, “Why don’t *you* punch him?”

“Well, wait a minute,” Craddock said as he readjusted his seatbelt, and he reached across her and tugged the man’s sleeve. The man jerked around and said, “Yes?”

“We were concerned about you; we thought something was wrong,” Craddock explained. The woman piped up, “We thought you might be dead.”

Craddock added, “Well, your eyes were wide open, but you seemed asleep.” The man then explained that this was a method he had developed for total relaxation. He used it all the time on planes before he had to sit through intense business meetings. That satisfied Craddock and he went back to reading, and the man went back to his relaxation posture.

But the woman was still gasping. She turned to Craddock and whispered, “Have you ever seen anything like that? Eyes wide open, unblinking, looking for all intents and purposes like he’s dead?”

To which Craddock answered, “Well, yes ma’am, I have—every Sunday morning.”
(taken from a colleagues sermon, but it may be included in [Craddock Stories](#).)

I’m sure Craddock would NOT have said that about his preaching experience at East Dallas Christian Church!

Such an experience would have probably given any of us a start. To think that that person on our row might be dead, only to have him turn and speak! The dead coming to life—sounds like a horror movie!

That’s the strange image we get from Ezekiel’s vision this morning. Our scripture is a tale about a valley filled with dry bones which come together to re-animate/re-incarnate the dead the life.

Now if you’re saying to yourself—“didn’t we just hear Deborah preach on this scripture a couple of months ago?” you would be right. But just in case you forgot, let’s do a quick review of who the visionary prophet of this morning’s text is.

The prophet Ezekiel was one of many Judeans who had been captured by Nebuchadnezzar and taken to Babylon in exile. Before the overthrow of his government, Ezekiel had been given visions about the potential attack, and had been vocal in his warnings to his people that they had better shape up, or they would be shipped out.

Ezekiel's warning went unheeded, and for 10 years the prophet and his people lived in exile in a foreign land. After this length of time, the Lord came to Ezekiel again in a series of dreams. Instead of visions of destruction, God showed Ezekiel signs of re-construction, restoration, hope.

In the vision we heard this morning from chapter 37, God shows the prophet a desert shimmering in the afternoon heat. (Now you know why we had to re-visit this text again for our summer sermon series "The Hot word from the Bible," because you can't talk about intense summer heat without turning to the desert.)

One of the dangers in the desert is the mirage, the radiating heat creating a watery image for a thirsty traveler. We Dallasites have seen it in recent days as we've traveled hot highways in which we can see what looks like a puddle of water up ahead of us on the road, only to get there and find it dry. Back in Ezekiel's day, the mirage would sometimes lure the dehydrated and sometimes discombobulated desert wanderers to what they thought was water—but instead was a dry death.

Even today the mirage causes problems in America's western deserts. Phoenix's newspaper, the Arizona Republic, reported a few years ago about California pelicans, who, far away from their natural habitat, search for water to cool themselves off from the intense Arizona sun. Thinking that they are landing on a body of water, they crash into the hot sand and die, their bones looking incongruous next to the cow's skull.

I wonder if Ezekiel thought the Lord had been out in the sun too long when he gave the prophet his orders. Could God have been seeing a desert mirage when He *(sic)* shows Ezekiel a valley filled with bones and says, "Son of man, can you give these people home? Can you make these bones live?"

Ezekiel bit his tongue with the obvious response, and very politically and politely said, "Only you know, O Lord God."

Then the Lord said to Ezekiel, "Help these people. Command these bones to come back together, and I'll do the rest."

So, Ezekiel did what he was told, and in his vision he was amazed to hear the rattling of bones upon bone, to see the snapping of sinew and muscle holding the bones in place, and finally, the protective covering of flesh upon the now reanimated bodies.

And, as God promised, He *(sic)* did the rest. The Lord blew divine breath into the figures, a mighty wind that filled their lung and cooled their brow and opened their eyes in wonder.

Then the Lord spoke to the bones, which represented the people of Israel--dried of hope. Their spirit had shriveled up inside of themselves, and they were like the living dead in Babylon—eyes wide open, but not really seeing a thing.

The Lord turned to Ezekiel and asked in the vision, "Can you give my people hope? Together, you and I will bring these people the breath of life they need to survive."

Over the centuries, the Lord comes to us through this scripture and asks us, like he asked Ezekiel, "Can you give my people hope? Can you speak my words that will bring them up from the depths of despair to a place where they can drink of my spirit once again? Will you work with me to resuscitate them, to give them new life?"

How do we answer that call in the hot, dry desert of our 21st century days? Where do we see disciples of Christ offering living water to parched people thirsting for hope?

One such place that was hugely controversial in Tucson when I lived there was the ministry of First Christian Church. The members of that congregation had

gotten tired of the daily reports of bodies of Mexican migrants found in the desert around the city each summer, succumbing to sun and heat stroke in the 110-degree plus weather. Many of the deceased were children, traveling with their parents to find a new and better life in America.

The members got together and formed a group called Humane Border, putting huge tanks of water at various locales in the desert to sustain needy travelers. Though many in Tucson grumbled about how the water was an invitation for those illegally in our country to keep coming, First Christian Church--and the Border Patrol and the Arizona State government-- worked together to bring the water of life to the desert. "Can you give my people hope? Can you speak my words that will give them new life?" the Lord asks us.

The intense heat of summer also seems to dry up any last reserves of patience or forgiveness in people's hearts who have suffered a hurt in their lives. Instead, the heat of anger seems to take over with seemingly no way to cool it down.

Sixteen years ago this summer, Sopehia White—31 at the time—found herself burning up and burned out. On August 9th, 1993, she burst into the hospital nursery at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles, wielding a .38 caliber handgun. She had come gunning for Elizabeth Staten, a nurse whom she accused of stealing her husband. White fired six shots, hitting Staten in the wrist and stomach.

Staten tried to flee, and White chased her into the emergency room, firing once more. There, with blood on her clothes and a hot pistol in her hand, the attacker was met by another nurse, Joan Black, who did the unthinkable. Black walked calmly to the gun-toting woman, hugged her, and spoke comforting words.

The assailant cried, and said she didn't have anything to live for, that Staten had stolen her family. "You're in pain," Black acknowledged. "I'm so sorry, but everybody has pain in their lives...we need each other to help work things out."

As they talked, the hospital invader kept her finger on the trigger. Once, she began to lift the gun as if to shoot herself. Nurse Black just pushed her arm

down and continued to hold her. Finally, Sopehia White gave the gun to the nurse.

She was disarmed by a hug. That embrace held the cooling, calming essence of God's presence. ([Fresh Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching](#). ed., by Edward K Rowell, Baker Books, 1997. pg. 23—also verified by www.time.com/time/magazine).

“Will you bring my people hope? Will you speak my words and give them hope for new life?” the Lord asks us.

So think with me now, of those people you know who are bone-dry people. I'm not talking about those who are suffering from osteoporosis, although that might be part of the pain some are feeling in our world. No, I'm talking about those who are having a difficult time seeing a future for themselves—they are arid and thirsting for hope. What is it that you can do to answer God's call to help resuscitate their lives?

One person in our church who has a unique way of bringing new life to people is my friend Sam Holmes. When Sam calls upon our homebound members, he always brings a prayer and his smile—and, of course, a joke. For example, Sam just shared this last week that he saw a “classified ad which read: For sale. Complete 45 volume set of Encyclopedia Britannica. In excellent condition. \$1000 or best offer. No longer needed. Just got married. Wife knows everything.”

See how easy that is? People can't help but laugh—in fact, people NEED to laugh. They need to laugh to live! Did you know that the root word of “humor” in Latin is “liquid; moisture.” When we are at our driest, thirsting for hope, laughter is one of the best medicines.

I suppose in some way, Ezekiel must have wanted to laugh when the Lord told him to command the dry bones to come back to life again. How ludicrous! How insane! And how wonderfully powerful to know that the Lord works with us to bring hope to the hopeless, life to the lifeless, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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