

Deborah Sokolove: Dry Bones

A Sermon for Seekers Church

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by Deborah Sokolove

Dry Bones

In the Jewish tradition, the passage from Ezekiel that we read today is appointed as a reading for the Sabbath that falls within the weeklong celebration of Passover, and for much the same reason. Both the Jewish Passover and the Christian Lent are concerned with the formation and renewal of a people. For both traditions, this passage is an assurance that whatever catastrophes have happened – however much the community has lost of its original vision and commitment, however much it has fallen away from a living, breathing connection with its source – God's love is able to restore life and wholeness to the community, even if all that is left is dry, dusty bones.

As I was preparing to preach today, I came across a new translation of Ezekiel 37, provided by Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Shalom Center, in Philadelphia. On its web site, the Shalom Center speaks of its commitment to actively working for peace and justice, to finding gender-inclusive language for prayer and scripture, and to an ecologically sensitive re-understanding of the dietary rules. In fact, they sound a lot like us, except for the part about shared leadership – and Jesus, of course.

In explaining his linguistic choices, Rabbi Waskow writes:

The word "ruach" (or "ruchot") appears ten times in these fourteen verses. It means in English "spirit," "breath," or "wind." The word "breath" has been used in translating it wherever it appears, sometimes in a compound word like

"breathing-wind." The words "Breath of Life" have been used to translate [the unprounouncable, 4-letter Name of God.] "Pillar of the World" has been used to translate "Adoni," [another of the Hebrew names of God] which can mean 'pillar' or "hinge" as well 'as "lord." The verb "yada," which can mean "know" or "make love" or "deeply experience," is here translated "know-in-your-heart." "Ben adam" is translated "child of earth," or "earthling," to pick up its relationship to "adamah," "earth." (from <http://www.shalomctr.org>)

Those who were in the [Mark class](#) that David and I co-led in the fall may recognize this last term, "ben adam", as one of the titles given to Jesus in the New Testament, where its traditional translation is "Son of Man." In Modern Hebrew, it has come to mean "a real person." However, let us listen to Rabbi Waskow's translation.

*The hand of YHWH, the Breath of Life, was on me,
And in a rushing-breath, YHWH brought me forth
and set me in the center of a valley –
Full of bones!*

– And led me all around them, all around.

*Here! – Very many on the face of the valley,
and here! – utterly dry.*

And said to me;

"Child of Adam, earthling, can these bones live?"

*I said – "Pillar of the World, Breath of Life –
You know-it-in-your-heart, and only you."*

Then God said to me,

"Prophecy upon these bones!

Say to them,

'Dry bones,

Hear the word of the One Who breathes all life!

*Thus speaks the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life, to
these bones:*

*"Here! – I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall
live.*

*I will weave muscles on you,
and raise flesh upon you,
and form skin on you,
I will give you breath,
And you shall live!
And so you will deeply know that I am YHWH,
the Breath of Life."'"*

*So I prophesied as I was commanded.
And while I was prophesying,
there came a voice, and – here! a commotion! –
and the bones came together,
bone to bone.
And I saw – here! – upon them muscles;
Flesh arose, skin covered them;
But there was no breath in them.
Then God said,
"Prophecy to the rushing-breath-of-wind –
Prophecy, you child of earth! –
and say to the breathing-wind –
Thus says the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life –
From the four breathing-winds come, O breath,
And puff upon these slain, that they shall live."
So I prophesied as God commanded me,
and the breath blew into them.
They lived, and stood upon their feet,
An overwhelming, overwhelming vast array of strength.
Then God said to me,
"Child of earth,
These bones are the whole house of Israel.
Here! – they say,
'Dried up – our bones,
Shattered – our hopes,
Cut off – our roots.'
So prophesy and say to them,
'Thus speaks the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life:
"Here! – I will open your graves,
and rouse you from your graves,*

my people!

And I will bring you to the earth of Israel.

And you shall know-deep-in-your-heart

that I am YHWH, the Breath of Life,

when I have opened your graves,

and roused you from your graves,

my people.

And I will put my breath within you,

and you shall live,

and I will place you on your own earth,

and you shall know-deep-in-your-heart

that I the Breath of Life have spoken,

and made it happen –

proclaims the Breath of Life."'"

It seems to me that in the last year, Seekers has gone through a season of being dry, dusty bones. Stewards wrestled with new definitions of membership; mission groups disbanded or reorganized; hard words were said, and hard feelings made for awkward silences and feelings of disconnection. Lately, however, I sense a new wind blowing among us, the Breath of Life restoring us to wholeness.

Part of that new wind is a renewed sense of who we are as members of the Body of Christ. As you may or may not have noticed, the focus of much of this season's preaching has been on what could be called "the basics" of Christian faith and Seekers practice. [David began](#) our Lenten Sundays with a reminder of our heritage from the Church of the Saviour in the form of commitment to a life of sacrificial service for the glory of God. The following week, Elisabeth told us something of her own journey of brokenness and healing, seeing herself in the story of Nicodemus and the need to be fully seen and heard in our deepest moments. Two weeks ago, [Brenda invited](#) us to consider what it means to be an outsider, reminding us that life in Christ is a journey toward God's justice. Last week, [Muriel told](#) us what it has been like for her to be part of the

Church of the Saviour and then Seekers for nearly fifty years.

As part of this series, today I will focus on one of the central features of Seekers Church – the open pulpit. On behalf of Celebration Circle, Sherri put an article into the most recent issue of *Soundings*, describing some of the most common kinds of sermons that are given here, and inviting everyone to consider what they could offer during this part of our Sunday worship. In that article, she identified three kinds of sermons: the testimonial or personal reflection, growing out of the preacher's personal journey; the theological reflection, focusing closely on a scriptural passage or some tenet of Christian doctrine; and the communal reflection, speaking about our life together as a community of faith. Another way of thinking about the last two is along the lines of style rather than subject matter. Both theological and communal reflections may either preach or teach. A sermon may be prophetic, calling us to action – to right societal injustice, or to serve those whom the larger society sees as having no value – based on something in scripture, a theological tradition of the church universal, or something in our more particular communal tradition. On the other hand, a sermon may lay bare the bones of scripture, the reasons behind some theological point, or something in our lives together.

When I serve as liturgist, I often say in introducing the preacher for the day something like: "Because we believe that the Word of God may come to any one of us, anyone may sign up for a time to preach." What does it mean to say that we believe the Word of God may come to anyone? On what do we base that belief? What are the implications of such a belief for those who gather their courage to stand at the pulpit, as well as for those who receive their words?

The first time I stood at this pulpit was on Palm Sunday, almost exactly 12 years ago. I had not signed up to preach. I had only been coming to Seekers since the January of that year, and was in the midst of my first class in the [School of](#)

[Christian Living](#). Glen and I had had the good fortune to show up at Seekers just as Peter was about to teach a class was called "Introduction to Seekers Church." David was the Shepherd of the class, and Mollie was there, too. So was Jane, and Juanita, who since has joined another church. On that day, these strangers-now-become-friends stood as my sponsors as Sonya poured water over my head and spoke the words of baptism as I knelt on the floor before the altar. Marjory was the preacher that day, and she generously gave over a few minutes of the sermon time so that I could give my testimony as a new Christian, my understanding of what it meant to be baptized into Christ.

The following year, in gratitude for the healing love that continued to surround me, I signed up to preach for the first time. That year, like this year, there was a war going on in the Middle East. I spoke of my life in Jerusalem twenty years earlier and my fears for my friends and relatives who still live in Israel. I spoke also of my new life among you, of my learning that our deepest wounds can be healed by letting others explore them with us, that the Body of Christ is not whole if even one of its members is in pain.

I remember being overwhelmed by the response of this community, by the loving, attentive listening, the sense that everyone was with me, and that the Holy Spirit enveloped us all. For days afterward, I walked around stunned, astonished that what I had said seemed to matter so much to so many people. I even called up Marjory, asking her to help me understand what had happened. After all, by that time I had been teaching college for a number of years, and was accustomed to speaking to large groups of people on a regular basis.

What I felt standing at this pulpit was different. This was not a professional presentation; the congregation was not a classroom of students worried about their grades. Instead, I was speaking to a group of people most of whom had been

Christians far longer than I had, who had much more experience in living a life of faith in community, and who nevertheless were willing to listen with their hearts as well as their minds to what I had to say. That Sunday morning, I was heard into speech at the most profound level I had ever experienced.

My pile of sermons has grown several inches thick since then. A few months later, I was invited by [Celebration Circle](#) to preach on a passage in I Corinthians, and I have preached three or four times a year ever since. When I was studying in seminary, and later, when I was studying liturgy more seriously, I tried to share some of what I was learning. Other times, I have spoken of particular issues that have come up, either within Seekers or in society. I have signed up to preach because I have something of burning concern, or because something in the readings speaks to me. I have also offered to preach because no one else has signed up, and as a member of Celebration Circle and a Steward of this church, I have made a commitment to do whatever is needed for our common worship. In addition, sometimes, like today, I preach because Celebration Circle as a whole has discerned a word for the community, and I have volunteered to try to translate that word into speech.

The word that Celebration Circle has heard has to do with the theology of the open pulpit. In most Christian churches, it is very rare for anyone but an ordained minister to preach. Many denominations require a seminary degree or equivalent study at the Master's level for ordination, and candidates are examined for their theological orthodoxy and familiarity with the polity and disciplines of the particular church before ordination is conferred. Other denominations, and some non-denominationally affiliated churches, do not require this kind of intellectual preparation, but do expect intense spiritual preparation and devotion from their leaders. Here at Seekers, we have a radical understanding of the priesthood of all believers. We do not ordain certain individuals to interpret scripture for us or to call us to action, but rather take

seriously the Reformation notion that every person is at liberty to read and interpret scripture for herself or himself and to follow God's leading rather than that of another person.

This freedom, however, has limits when it comes to standing at the pulpit. For when I stand here and say, in effect, "The hand of YHWH, the Breath of Life, is on me," and "God has said to me, "Prophecy upon these bones! Say to them, 'Dry bones, Hear the word of the One who breathes all life! Thus speaks the Pillar of the World, the Breath of Life, to these bones," you need to be able to trust that I have been listening well. When I bring the Word of God to this congregation, you have the right to expect that I have been spending time in prayer, paying attention to the resounding silence with which God may speak. You have the right to expect that I have been studying the same scriptural texts that you have been reading from the lectionary, wrestling with their meanings not only for me, not only historically, but also for the entire congregation, for this time in history. You have the right to expect that I speak what I have discerned with humility, with the awareness that someone else may have heard God speak differently, with a different accent, or in a different key. In short, when I stand before you at the pulpit, I am accountable to you, as well as to God, for what I say. Moreover, when you stand here, you are likewise accountable.

That sounds like a tall order. In fact, some of you may be shaking your heads, saying, "I'm never going to put myself in **that** position!" If that is you, I invite you to reconsider. Every year, 30 or 40 different people stand here to offer the Word that they have heard, and not once have I seen anyone struck down by lightning. To help people prepare, Celebration Circle has published a ten-point "[Guidelines for Preachers](#)," which is available on the Web. These guidelines read:

1. As you select the form of your preaching offering, consider the variety – teaching, prophecy, visioning,

participative, non-verbal, etc. We encourage variety, and want you to use a form that empowers you. If you want to talk over an unconventional approach, call the Celebration Circle.

2. Make an explicit connection to the Lectionary Scriptures for the week.
3. Consider how your sermon can be related to the theme for the worship season.
4. Consider how your offering is grounded in your personal theological understanding: use your own story as one part of our story as a Christian community.
5. Consider how your offering can build the life of the Seekers. Encouragement, teaching and prophetic confrontation all have a place, but the goal is to engage with us as a community and help us be on our journey.
6. Consider how you can invite us to an encounter with God, and a relationship with Christ.
7. Consider how you can invite each of us into a deeper connection with the Seekers' Church.
8. Consider how you can invite us to an outer journey in mission as well as an inner journey of spiritual growth.
9. Consider how you can link us to our Christian tradition.
10. Consider how you can shed light on the meaning of Christian Discipleship in terms of our heritage within the Church of the Saviour – servant leadership, committed membership, mission, call, gifts, etc..

Above all, remember that these are *guidelines*, not rules. In the end, God's Spirit must guide each of us who offers the Word to the community during worship as we prepare and present what we have to offer. Celebration Circle seeks to encourage your creativity, while maintaining a sense of our faith journey together as a community. Because we do not ordain one or only a few people to interpret God's voice, we need to hear how God speaks to **you** in order to have a clearer idea of what God is saying to all of us.

Having invited you to step forward into the pulpit, I now need to tell you that this will be my last sermon for a while. I have completed all the preliminaries toward my Ph.D., and am about to commit most of my energy to writing my dissertation on how the Methodists use visual materials in worship to note the liturgical seasons and special occasions. As I enter this demanding and lonely process, I ask for your prayers, and not too many questions. If all goes well, I expect to be finished about this time next year. Meanwhile, I hope that we will sing "We Are Not Our Own" – the hymn we just sang – from time to time. Brian Wren wrote it for the 10th anniversary of the Liturgical Studies program at Drew University. That is my department, and the words he wrote were particularly intended for scholars embarking on a professional life devoted to the art of worship. When we sing that hymn, it not only connects me to my distant colleagues, but also reminds me that the liturgies I help to write for Seekers live beyond the moment in which we say the words.

As I step aside from this pulpit for a time, I hope that the space that opens looks inviting to you. Whether you have never preached before or have done it a hundred times, we in Celebration Circle would be delighted to help you think through your sermon ideas. Even if you have only what seems to be a pile of dry, dusty bones, the Holy One promises

*"I will weave muscles on you,
and raise flesh upon you,
and form skin on you,
I will give you breath,
And you shall live!
And so you will deeply know that I am YHWH,
the Breath of Life."*