

When God steps into the picture

Message for Sunday, April 7, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Children's Message:

I'd like you to meet a friend of mine. I have another friend whose name is Tony. But this friend is Boney. *Show the skeleton I have, which is made from cardboard.*

Boney doesn't do very much; mostly just lies around, waiting for someone to play with him. Would you like to play with him? He likes it when you tickle his toes! His whole leg jiggles when you do that.

Can you make Boney stand up? *Help them, because they may not be tall enough.* Now can you make Boney walk? *Coach them to move the legs, to make Boney walk a few steps.*

How about this: can you make Boney pray? *This is more complicated, getting Boney to kneel, and clasp his hands in prayer. It's fun to do it though, making Boney take different poses.*

Now, is Boney *really* praying?

Why not? Even if you make Boney look like he's praying, he's not saying anything. Because he's not really alive. Only God can give life.

We can do many things by ourselves. With some things we need God's help.

Message: "When God steps into the picture"

As we go through the season of Lent, we're now one week away from the time when Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time. He's on his way to die, and he knows full well what awaits him. The ruling powers will crush this wave of good news about a new kingdom, a kingdom built on love, not on power or greed. It looks hopeless, terrifying—at least from the perspective of those who don't see the whole picture.

The prophet Ezekiel has a vision of something that looks hopeless, even terrifying: a valley of bones. Human bones. Bones that were once men and women, perhaps children. People who loved and

were loved. People who worked, making a contribution to society. Then something tragic happened, and this is all that's left.

Bones. As far as you can see, nothing but bones. The empty eye sockets of skulls stare into space, seeing nothing. Death reigns in this place. That valley of bones is a place of grief, of hopelessness.

Just like in the hospital room where you said your final good-bye to your loved one. Just like the cemetery where you laid her or him to rest.

The followers of Jesus don't know it yet, but they will soon experience this too. They will watch helplessly as their messiah, their teacher, their friend is hauled away, beaten, nailed to a cross. Grief and hopelessness will sweep over them like a tsunami.

That valley of bones, those moments in your life, and Jesus' followers in Jerusalem: these are all places where life ends, where hope is snuffed out. Until God steps into the picture.

In the vision that Ezekiel has, God tells him to do the strangest thing: to speak the word of the Lord to the bones. Sometimes preachers wonder if anyone out there is listening. What if you *know* that no one is listening, and yet you speak anyway? That's what Ezekiel does. He doesn't understand why or what; he just obeys God.

To his astonishment, the bones begin moving. They attach to one another, forming skeletons. Then tendons and muscles cover the bones, and finally skin over everything.

Ezekiel speaks the word of the Lord again to the bones, and this time the breath of God enters them and gives them life. The vision represents the people of God. They feel as good as dead. They think God has abandoned them. They feel only grief and hopelessness. God is saying to them through this vision, "Fear not! I am the Lord your God, and I am with you."

New life! A future! Hope is restored. God's beloved people get up and get going again.

Then there's the disciples of Jesus. I know I'm getting a little ahead of next week, but they can't believe it. They watch as everything they had hoped

for unravels around them and they are powerless to do anything to stop it. Jesus, rather than running and hiding, seems to embrace it: he told them several times he was going to Jerusalem to die; during the meal earlier that evening he talked about giving his body and blood for them; he commanded them to love, not fight, when he is taken away.

Some are there when his battered and bruised body emerges from the Roman garrison. They gasp, their mouths drop open in disbelief. He's carrying a cross. That means they're going to—oh no! It can't be! Most of them scatter to safety. A few stay, and afterwards take his body and bury it as best they can. It's all over. He's gone.

Then God steps in the picture. On the third day, the tomb is empty. Jesus is alive! New life! A future! Hope is restored. God's beloved people get up and get going again.

And now, what about us? What about you and the difficulties you face week to week? What about the grief you've gone through? What might happen if you let God step into the picture?

In the valley of the dry bones, and again in Jerusalem, God did something. Something totally unexpected. I've had this happen: I'm praying for this... and something completely different, something even better than what I had in mind, happens. That's how I ended up coming here, instead of some other place.

Does God have permission to do the unexpected in your life? Are you willing to completely surrender yourself to God, and follow him no matter what that might mean?

We know this much: where God is, there is new life. There is hope. There is a future.

Next Steps:

- Pray: tell God your hurt, your grief, your disappointment, your fear. Let it out. [Note: If you're afraid that it's wrong to be negative with God, just read some prayers in the Psalms! Like Psalm 13, 22, 35, 42. *]
- Pray: now receive God's love in return. Know that you are forgiven, you are cherished, you are special, you are God's beloved child, whom he will never, *never* leave alone.
- Pray: Give thanks. Make plans. Live!

* I'll tell this story, to illustrate the power of the honesty and truth in the Psalms:

Philip Yancey in one of his books tells about a woman who was devastated when her husband left her, shortly after their only son had died. She wasn't ready to talk with friends about it, but she didn't want to stay alone in their house. So she got in her car and drove. Drove for hours until nightfall, when she pulled into a motel. She checked into a room, and sat down on the side of the bed. "What now?" she wondered aloud.

Looking for a phone book to order in some food, she opened the drawer in the bedside table, only to find a Bible placed there by the Gideons. She wanted to pray, but didn't know how. She knew enough about the Bible to know that the book of Psalms was mostly prayers, so she turned there.

She read the first Psalm, which was about obeying God. It didn't do anything for her, so she went on to the next one. She kept on reading these prayers, one after the other. Some were so full of joy that she wanted to puke. But she found others in which the person praying shook the fist at God, demanding God come down and answer for all the injustice and wrong in life. She could relate to that. She kept on reading, hour after hour, until she finally came to the end of the Psalms.

She hadn't found any answers to her questions, but she had found peace. She had encountered God that night, and knew that God cared. She didn't know how she was going to cope, but she knew that she would, with God's help.