

It's not lost on me that I'm preaching on a text about skeletons the week after Halloween. This would have perhaps been more appropriate for a spooky sermon about bones rising again than now, a day when you'll hear about stewardship later in the service, but stay with me. I think that Ezekiel's prophetic vision of the valley of the dry bones has a lot to tell us about how to live today. God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" in our passage today. Ezekiel responds, "God, YOU know." The implied part of Ezekiel's answer is a resounding, "God, why are you asking me?" In some ways, I feel like I've been turning this question back to God – Can these bones live? God, YOU know. – since about March of 2020.

This response to God's question comes from a place of fear, a place of despair. For Ezekiel, it was literally coming from a graveyard. For some of us, the question may sound more like, "Can I make it? Can my community find joy in the midst of suffering? Can I continue after so much loss? Can I go back to who I was before lockdowns and shutdowns and fear of illness? God, YOU know."

COVID-19 was not the first time we turned these types of questions back to God. Many of us have lived in a world that does not feel particularly hope-filled, even before the pandemic.

I arrived in Boston almost a decade ago, filled with hope and joy. One of the first things people tend to notice about me to this day is that I am an outgoing and friendly person. When I moved to Boston for college, I was already the type to smile at strangers. As I put down roots here and kept getting to know the city, I'd often wish the buskers and unhoused folks I saw a good day and ding my bicycle bell at little kids when I passed by. Perhaps it has something to do with my chosen vocation, but I still find myself chatting with strangers on the T, in the line at the grocery store, and very often in Ubers. These strangers share life-defining stories in our brief conversations. I love this part of my life. To me, these stories are ones of hope. When I get to hear them, my Christian heart fills to the point overflowing, for they've been one of God's great gifts to me. It makes me hopeful in a world that so often feels cynical.

But many of you may have guessed the next part of the story. This human connection, which stemmed from a place of hope, has come with costs. I've been catcalled, followed, and made to feel small by the things people have said to me. Some people have taken my smile or willingness to chat as an invitation to comment on my body, my gender, my clothing. When I try to remove myself from the situation, the language often turns violent, telling me that I brought this upon myself. By smiling. By saying hello. By wearing whatever I was wearing.

You know and I know that this is not true, that I did not cause these reactions. But for a few years, that hopeful engagement that spilled out of me on the street – I tamped it down. I kept my eyes on the sidewalk and said nothing. I didn't make eye contact. I had my headphones in to block out anything that people might say. If God was asking when my abundant joy, like Ezekiel's dry bones, would live, I wasn't listening or answering. I just wanted to keep my head down and stop hoping that those moments of connection would happen, to live in a world that felt a little more cynical, a little more insular.

And then, it was 2020.

During COVID, I realized how much I missed my city, even as I was still living in it. I know that many of you felt the same way, and maybe still do. We couldn't see people's faces anymore. Going to the grocery store felt urgent and dangerous – instead of checking for cracked eggs or searching for the perfectly ripe avocado, it was an exercise in getting in and out as quickly as possible. So many of the little interactions we all used to have – with a crossing guard or bus driver or barista – just didn't happen during lockdown. I didn't just hide my face and avoid eye contact to prevent unwanted conversation – COVID made my heart harden out of fear of infection. God was asking if the dry bones of my

communities could still live, but I was so deep in loneliness and fear, I didn't answer, even to turn that question back to God. I was trying to get through every day, struggling through Zoom grad school and missing my life. The dry bones looked dead to me, and I didn't have hope that they could look any different.

As lockdown continued and the weather got warmer, I started walking and biking more often to avoid public transportation. If you've ever biked in Boston, you know that it's impossible to keep your eyes downcast to the road in front of you. You are constantly looking around, checking where cars are now and where they're going, looking to sidewalks and crosswalks for errant children, dogs, and tourists. As I lifted my head back up, I started to see the people around me again. In protecting myself from unwanted comments and infection, I had forgotten about the hope that can be found all around us, in neighbors and strangers. I started dinging my bike bell at little kids again, watching them look up in pure delight to see me and my bicycle whiz past. I started chatting with people as I walked down my street. I tried to genuinely thank the folks who made my coffee or rang up my groceries, and the more I did those things, the more my own cup filled. I engaged with people again from that place of hope. God showed me a city of what I thought were dry bones, now with sinews and flesh and skin and

breath. And in seeing my city teeming with life and hope, I realized that my own dry bones had, at some point, come alive again.

I lost some of my own sense of hope before the pandemic, but it really took lockdown for me to start missing it. Once I started to get that hope back, one bike ride and walk around the neighborhood at a time, I knew that God was calling me back to hope by raising my own dry bones and giving me breath.

I promised you all that this sort of Halloween-y passage actually had something to tell us about stewardship. And here it is. Stewardship season is about keeping the lights on and paying the pastor and giving generously to the community, yes. But it is more than that. It is about cultivating a space where we can be a Christian community together. It is about listening to the countercultural call to put our money where our hearts should be. It's about changing the way we look at our world to bring God's kin-dom to our present. It's about hoping and praying that dry bones come back to life and praising God when we see proof of it happening all around us. Hope is what sets this church and other churches like it apart from the rest of the cynical world. Hope in dry bones that rise up, hope in a God that delivers us from the wilderness to the land of plenty, hope in a Savior whose resurrection defeated death.

That hope, in a world that doesn't feel particularly hopeful, is what we Christians can bring to church and beyond.

The posture of lifting your head up and reaching out to the world around you is an act of hope. When we give from that place, a God-thing happens. The power that money has over us loosens. When we change our posture from staring down at the street to looking up and reaching out, we are opening ourselves to each other and to God.

Hope means assuming risk. I smile on the street, hoping that this person will show kindness. When I give to my church – which I do, by pledging -- or leave an extra big tip, or drop a few dollars in someone's cup, I still feel that little twinge of worry. But I know that by giving, I am spreading hope. So I invite you all to join me. Dig into that hope, and in doing so, notice your gaze lifting to the world around you. See that there is proof everywhere that dry bones are raised and living, including our own.

Amen.