

## **“Beyond Exile: New Life”**

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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Our scripture today is famous in the book of Ezekiel, and certainly one of the most memorable in all the Old Testament. It holds a sort of creepy fascination. We can picture the valley of the dry bones, bones as far as you can see. Bones without a shred of flesh on them, the life long since sapped out of them, baked in the sun for God knows how long. The image is weird and otherworldly and we don't know quite what to make of it.

It is a prophetic vision. Artists depict it in surreal ways. A Dali landscape or Picasso's famous painting, La Guernica, comes to mind, with its images of death. Ezekiel the prophet and priest, is set down into this desolate valley. Now this is not simply a boneyard, a battle gone terribly wrong. The unburied bones make it a place of complete defilement and ritual impurity, about the worst place on earth a priest could be. But there Ezekiel is, and God asks him an astonishing question. “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel scratches his own bony skull. He doesn't know what to say.

Fortunately for him and for us God explains the vision. The collective bones are the people of Israel, who are in exile, cut off from their homeland. God says, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” In exile. Without hope, without life. No prospect for any kind of future. You can't breathe new life into long dead bones. Anyone knows that.

Gilbert Tuhabonye is in exile. The former NCAA champion runner who graduated from Texas Abilene Christian University is an expatriate citizen of Burundi, a small mountainous country in East Central Africa.

More than ten years ago the centuries-old battle between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes came together in a terrible way to Gilbert's boarding school. Fueled by hatred, the Hutus forced more than a hundred Tutsi teenagers and teachers into a small room and used machetes to slash most of them to death. The unfortunate ones who survived were doused with gasoline and set on fire.

If you *Google* Gilbert Tuhabonye you will find two different angles on how and why he survived. One angle focuses on the human aspect of Gilbert's will to survive. How this great runner overcame adversity *through running*. That story is essentially a story of the salvific power of

long distance running, which many of you know is a kind of religion in and of itself. The other is a different story.

The other story is Gilbert's story, as he tells it. It is the story of the creative power of the word of God.

Here's how a writer for Texas Monthly describes that terrible night. "He was on fire. It was three in the morning, and most of his classmates from the Kibimba School in Burundi were dead---beaten and burned alive by friends of his, kids and grown-ups they had known most of their lives. Smoldering bodies lay in mounds all over the small room. [Death was everywhere. Gilbert] had used some of the corpses for cover, to keep from being hit by the fiery branches tossed in by the Hutu mob outside. For hours he had heard them laughing, singing, clapping, taunting. Waving their machetes, they had herded more than a hundred [people] into the room before sunset. A couple dozen were still alive, moaning in pain, dreaming of death. Gilbert wanted to kill himself. After hiding under a heap of his smoldering classmates for more than eight hours, Gilbert heard a voice saying, "You don't want to die. Don't do that."<sup>1</sup>

Gilbert's is a story of hope, of life after death.

Gilbert says he knew it was God speaking to him. Somehow, God was telling him his bones could live again, that he could rise out of the ashes of this horrible experience. Something good would come of it.

Gilbert Tuhabonye was the lone survivor of the attack at his school. He does not credit his long distance running or his own powerful will. He credits God for his survival.

Exile is more than being separated from the home country. Exile is not just something that happened to Israel in 587 B.C. Exile is not just something that happens to people in warring countries. Exile visits us at home, where we live. Exile is the circumstance and the anxiety of our day. Exile comes to camp among us, an unwelcome visitor, a grim reaper of sorts, rattling our serenity.

Christopher Seitz says "exile is death. It is a valley where all the prophet can see are bones, where he alone has eyes to see and hear the question too horrible to be answered except by God. . .The place of exile is not just the north country, or a new Egypt. . .It is as cold and final as the tomb, where no breath is drawn. . ." <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Hall, "Running for his Life", Texas Monthly, August 2003, p. 81.

<sup>2</sup> Imaging the Word, An Arts and Lectionary Resource, Vol. 2., p. 165.

Who among us can say we have never been disconnected, far away from home, alienated in some way? Who among us at some time doesn't feel lifeless and completely dried up? Who among us is not in some way unable to forgive, wounded deeply, scarred by a past over which we had no control? Who among us does not sometimes worry about the future of the community?

Many great theologians describe God as our home. Resting in God means resting in our true identity, in our true home country, a country with no borders or checkpoints, no boundaries or walls. We are all of us, resident exiles, living in two countries at the same time---the country of God's kingdom, the home country we get to glimpse, to visit from time to time. It's the place we see when worship works really well. The look of gratitude in a child's eyes, the feeling that overcomes us when we do good we didn't think we could do. Then there's the world of exile, the often painful world where we spend most of our days, bones scattered all around, sifting through the rubble of the news, amid the confusion of our lives, wondering if new life can come from all this.

The gospel---the good news of Ezekiel---says this. God breathes new life where there was once only death. God's creative power reaches beyond any limits we might imagine. There is indeed hope for our future, bleak though the present may be. The Sovereign Lord whose words created the universe, whose word brought dead bones back to life, whose Word made flesh died and conquered death for our sake, and whose living Word continues to breathe new life into our very beings, has made it so.

Gilbert Tuhabonye has made a new life for himself in Austin, Texas. He coaches runners; he is married and has two small children; he continues to train for the 2008 Olympics. But most importantly, he spreads the good news about the power of God's word to bring new life where there was once only death. Gilbert has taken it upon himself to personally forgive those who committed these terrible atrocities. There is forgiveness where there was once only hatred.

In Burundi, where Gilbert is from, your last name has to have a meaning. Tuhaboyne means 'a son of God'.<sup>3</sup> We are all, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of God, adopted and claimed by the Word before all words, the living word, the spirit of life.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Hall, "Running for his Life", Texas Monthly, August 2003, p. 81.