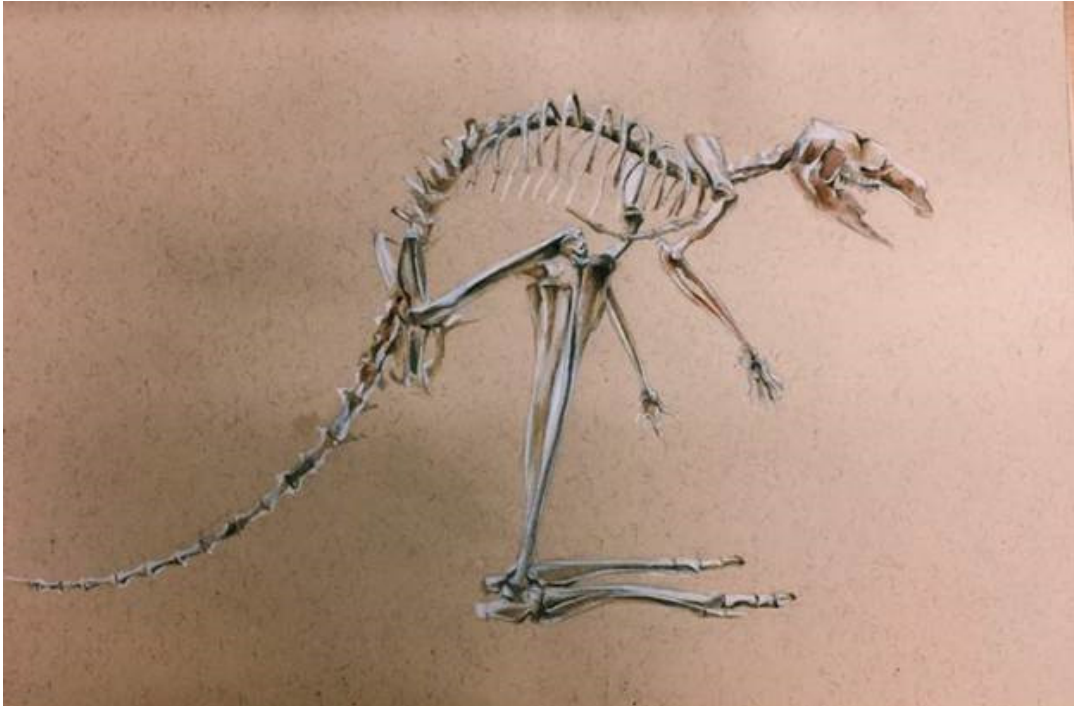


AColyte

March 2020 (#2)

A Journal of Faith, Doubt, and Other Things
at Austin College



Mortal,
Can these bones dance?

AColyte

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Tapping my foot in the newly-renovated Wynne Chapel
Later in March 2020

*Ernestine and Hazel say,
"Tomorrow's just another day."
The Mississippi River keeps on rollin'.
And we all have to learn the way
To leave our burdens where they lay
And find a way
To just keep going.
--Ed Rogers*

*We can dance if we want to.
--Men Without Hats*

Please indulge me in a little Wikipedia quote before we get properly started.

The **Revised Common Lectionary** is a [lectionary](#) of readings (or [pericopes](#)) from the Bible for use in [Christian worship](#), making provision for the [liturgical year](#) with its pattern of observances of festivals and seasons. ...[R]eadings are prescribed for each Sunday: a passage typically from the [Old Testament](#), or the [Acts of the Apostles](#); a passage from one of the [Psalms](#); another from either the [Epistles](#) or the [Book of Revelation](#); and finally a passage from one of the four [Gospels](#).

We follow the Revised Common Lectionary in the Austin College Religious Life Program.

Basically all that means is that, every week during the semester, the Majors Interns and I choose one of the four lectionary readings for that week as the focus for our Tuesday night Bible Study and Sunday night communion service.

And the only reason I want to tell you about that now is because this week's Old Testament reading in the Revised Common Lectionary is Ezekiel 37:1-14.

Here's what that says:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.

² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."

⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath^[a] to enter you, and you shall live.

⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath^[b] in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath:^[c] Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,^[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'

¹² Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

Frankly, it feels like it would be a little bit cheesy for me to bring up this famous "dry bones" passage out of the blue during this week when Austin College just happens to be trying to figure out how to continue our semester and restore some kind of order during this time of social distancing and remote learning.

It would just be kind of ham-fisted and unsubtle.

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But it's the dadgum lectionary passage! You can't blame me.

And so—here we go. I just can't *not* go there.

The hand of the Lord came upon me,
and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord
and set me down in the middle of a valley;
it was full of bones.

I'm sitting in the middle of the Austin College campus as I write this.

² He led me all around them;
there were very many lying in the valley,
and they were very dry.

I'm sitting in the middle of the Austin College campus as I write this, but most of our students are somewhere else.

There's almost no traffic on campus.

Nobody is going back and forth between classroom buildings.

The Dining Hall is almost empty.

³ He said to me,
"Mortal, can these bones live?"
I answered,
"O Lord God, you know."

"Can we have anything close to a 'normal' semester after all this coronavirus mess?"

I don't see how that could work.

⁴ Then he said to me,
"Prophecy to these bones, and say to them:
O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

The word "prophecy" probably doesn't mean what you think it means. It's got nothing to do with predicting the future.

To understand what "prophecy" means, you have to understand that the entire Bible was written before the development of any kind of mass communication that we would recognize. The cultures in which the Bible was written were complex, sophisticated, and varied. There was politics, and international intrigue, and diplomacy. There was all manner of intercultural interaction. Important communication took place across vast distances and between important figures.

And, amazingly, that communication was accomplished for centuries without text messages, email, Instagram, or telephones.

One way that monarchs, generals, and others in positions of authority shared “official” communications with each other was by sending a trusted, heavily-guarded, and officially endorsed messenger from VIP to the other. That process depended on the messenger delivering a message verbatim – with no editing or flourish – to its intended recipient. Everybody involved had to be sure that the content of the message was precisely articulated and accurately delivered.

It would be like if AC Student Body President **Nicole DeLuna** wanted to send a message to AC President **Steven O’Day**.

She would choose a trusted messenger, say **Michael Deen** for example, and then tell him exactly what the message was to be.

Michael

- would memorize the message,
- make the harrowing and potentially dangerous journey from the Wright Campus Center to the Caruth Administration Building,
- be admitted into the presence of President O’Day,
- and then say “Thus says President DeLuna” and recite her message exactly as it had been given to him.

The people in the cultures in which the Bible was written would have been familiar with this form of communication.

In our example, Michael Deen would have been known in Hebrew as a “nabi.” A “nabi” is a messenger.

The word is “nabi” in Hebrew. In English, it’s “prophet.”

In English, the word for the act of a “nabi” delivering their message is “prophesy.”

So when, in Ezekiel 37:4, God tells Ezekiel to “prophesy to these bones,” it is an instruction to Ezekiel to deliver verbatim a carefully articulated message.

Here’s the message:

⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones:

See? “Thus says...” Just like Michael delivering the message from President DeLuna to President O’Day.

I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.

Now it would be easy to go overboard comparing this image of the valley full of dry bones to the current situation of Austin College.

It’s not an exact parallel. Because we’re not dead.

But we were pretty scattered when this week started.

⁶ I will lay sinews on you,
and will cause flesh to come upon you,
and cover you with skin,
and put breath^b in you,
and you shall live;
and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

“Sinews” is a cool word.

Dictionary.com defines “sinew” as “a piece of tough fibrous tissue uniting muscle to bone or bone to bone; a tendon or ligament.”

The promise to “lay sinews on you” is a promise to connect the bones scattered through the valley.

In essentially two days, the entire Austin College faculty was able to reimagine, reconceive, and reconfigure *every single class* in the middle of the semester and make it possible for *every single Austin College student* to continue and complete the Spring semester.

That would have been complicated even if all the classes were essentially alike. But, of course, the point of Austin College is that our classes are not alike at all. So figuring how to make the transition to remote teaching and learning was a little different for every professor and every class.

But they did it. Don’t underestimate the magnitude of that accomplishment and ongoing challenge.

And, meanwhile, ARAMARK Dining services completely adjusted its way of serving food in the Dining Hall so we can all continue to eat even as we practice social distancing and do our part to flatten the curve.

And Student Affairs employees are currently in the process of making personal contact with *every single Austin College student* to be sure you're okay, that you've got a safe place to continue your semester, and to see if you're facing any additional issues related to the Coronavirus pandemic.

Sinews.

Connections.

They're real.

They matter.

And we've got them.

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded;
and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise,
a rattling,
and the bones came together,
bone to its bone.

That "rattling" was probably coming from the Faculty meetings that took place during Spring Break.

Or maybe from any of the daily meetings of the Senior Leadership Team.

But "the bones came together."

⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them,
and flesh had come upon them,
and skin had covered them;
but there was no breath in them.

By the middle of last week, we had a plan for continuing and completing the semester.

We had Zoom training and alternative fitness options and Hand Sanitizer outside the Dining Hall and all sorts of other plans and processes.

But we had no students.

⁹ Then he said to me,
"Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal,

and say to the breath:^[c]
Thus says the Lord God:
Come from the four winds, O breath,^[d]
and breathe upon these slain,
that they may live.”

“Stay home if you need to stay home.”

“Come back to Sherman (and to campus) if you need to come back.”

“But either way, let’s get busy. Let’s figure out – together – how to be who we are and do what we do.”

¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me,
and the breath came into them,
and they lived,
and stood on their feet,
a vast multitude.

Students are “back.”

We’re reconnecting with each other – on line, in remote classes, some of us on campus (from six feet away)

But we’re “us” again.

¹¹ Then he said to me,
“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.
They say, ‘Our bones are dried up,
and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely.’”

It kind of felt that way last week as we were canceling athletic seasons and theatre productions and all sorts of other things around here.

Some of us probably felt “dried up” and “cut off completely.”

¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God:
I am going to open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves, O my people;
and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.
¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord,
when I open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves, O my people.

Again, I don't want to be too melodramatic. We're not dead. We're not in graves.

But we do want to get back.

And we're not there (or here) yet.

¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live,
and I will place you on your own soil;
then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,
says the Lord."

On Tuesday, four students and a dog ("Kingston") joined me on Zoom for our weekly Bible Study. We talked about this passage (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

We were in five different cities. But we were together – being who we are and doing what we do.

We were "on our own soil."

We were connected by sinews.

The Service Station Board is having a Zoom meeting tonight.

The Academic Skills Center and Scarborough Writing Center are working together to offer online tutoring appointments right now.

The Athletic folks have put together "No DFP? No Problem" messages with suggestions about ways to remain fit on campus while also social distancing.

Austin College has hosted a Christian Communion service in Wynne Chapel every Sunday night that classes have been in session since August of 1993. And we're gonna do one on Zoom this Sunday. Watch your email for further details.

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*I tried hard to tell you I was no kinda dancer
You'd take my hand to prove I was wrong
You guided me gently, though I thought I could never
We were dancing together
At the end of the song.
--Robert Earl Keen*

Less than two months ago – although it feels like another life – Austin College hosted the annual Grace Presbytery Senior High Youth Connection (SHYC). At that event, 225 Presbyterian Senior High students spent a weekend on campus singing, playing, praying, and doing energizers.

As many of you know, “energizers” are kind of weird Presbyterian line-dancy sorts of things that are big fun when you’re in a big room full of loud music and happy people jumping around, dancing, and being silly.

One of my favorite memories from SHYC this year was watching AC first year student, and ACTivator, **Anika Chand** do energizers.

I love watching all ACTivators do energizers, but I was especially moved by watching Anika because she is confined to a wheelchair.

She has a chronic disease that keeps her from being able to stand and walk.

That’s unfortunate. She deals with it bravely and with grace.

I’m sorry that Anika has to deal with those limits.

But here’s the thing:

Those limits didn’t keep Anika from dancing.

*I didn't want an invitation to this party
But I'm here and so I'm gonna dance
--John “Cajun” Rushing*

In the last few days, I’ve been thinking a lot about Anika doing energizers.

And as I think about her, and about us, and about Ezekiel 37, I hear God asking us a slightly different question than Ezekiel is asked in 37:3 –

Mortal, can these bones dance?

Yes, yes we can.

And we shall.

Count on it.

Until Next Time, I Remain,
Just Another Cowboy Preacher,
Glad to see familiar faces and hear familiar voices,

JOHN WILLIAMS
Chaplain

TWO MORE THINGS:

*Every Child Has known God,
Not the God of names,
Not the God of don'ts,
Not the God who ever does Anything weird,
But the God who only knows four words
And keeps repeating them, saying:
"Come dance with Me."
Come
Dance.*

– Hafiz, rendered by Daniel Ladinsky

<https://giphy.com/gifs/funny-lol-guitarhero-UgD64OxiNyTBK>