

Nothing But Bones  
A sermon by David Roquemore  
First Presbyterian Church, Newton  
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Amos 8: 1-14

We read from Amos today, which isn't the most pleasant and reassuring text in the Bible, is it? I saw in it a line earlier this week which spoke to me. Amos is describing the destruction that God is going to allow to come to Jerusalem, after its disobedience, and it says, in the ESV translation, "So many dead bodies! They are thrown everywhere!"

You know, last week we were in Paris, France, with our daughter Emily and her husband Matt. Our son Peter, who set all of this up, was home in Los Angeles because he and his wife caught Covid the day before they were to fly. So there were only five of us. We did the usual tourist things, and took loads of photos, most of which you can see on my wife's Facebook page.

We saw several churches: Saint-Chapelle, near the Cathedral of Notre-Dame; it is a marvelous display of stained glass. We visited Sacre-Coeur, on the hill where the early pagans martyred Christians. And we went to the Basilica of Saint-Denis, where all the kings of France are buried. Wonderful sights, all of them. You get an idea of the glory of medieval architecture.

Then we went into the catacombs. All I knew about them was that there were lots of bones. Forty years ago, the pastor I worked for talked about them, and said, "when Jesus comes back, there will be a huge traffic jam down there, with all these bones flying around trying to link up with the correct other bones". I imagined piles of skulls in a cave, and piles of little finger bones in another. That isn't the way it is at all.

You see, in the late eighteenth century, there was a sinkhole in Paris. The king and the government sent engineers in to find out what was wrong. They determined that all the mining that had taken place over the previous centuries had left certain places vulnerable. At the same time, some of the cemeteries were also sinking; and the people needed the land for buildings. So it was decided to move the bones from the cemeteries into some of the crypts left by the miners. Far from just piling the bones in there, they stacked them carefully and reverently, with the long bones forming a wall behind which the smaller bones are piled. There is a row of skulls in each wall of long bones, and on many of them, a plaque which tells where they came from. There are millions of bones, millions of skeletons down there.

At one place I saw a plaque that had a verse from a famous French poet, Alphonse de Lamartine. The verse begins, "They were what we are." That struck me! They were — living human beings. Each one of those skulls was someone's head. Each bone was someone's leg, someone who lived and breathed, who ate and drank and worked and loved, just as we do. It really gave meaning to the line we repeat over and over on each Ash Wednesday: "remember, you are dust, and to dust you will return."

So many dead bodies! They are thrown everywhere! So says the prophet. He foresees a time when invaders will kill so many people. It will be like the Russians invading Ukraine, burying huge numbers of people in pits, without identifying markers. We won't know who all of these dead people are, we will simply know that they were once like us, were once living, loving human beings.

You know, sitting at home this week with Covid, which wasn't terribly bad for me, thanks be to God and the vaccination shots, I thought about those who didn't have it so easy, who died from this disease. Some of our beloved friends right here in the congregation, though thankfully not too many. I think of Ed Nolley and Dave Clarke. I also think of all the others, the hundreds of thousands, millions across the world, who have died in the last two years. They are remembered by those who knew them and loved them, but in a generation or two, they will be just nameless dead. In a thousand years, there will be nothing remembered, just some bones. So many dead bodies. They are thrown everywhere. They were what we are!

I hope this will give us pause, and help us remember that we are no different from those nameless dead. All of the work we put into our success, into our work, into making a difference, being famous, — all of it is vanity, as Ecclesiastes says. All of it makes little difference in the long run, for all of us end up in the grave.

Yet, the prophet calls us to do something meaningful with the time that we have, to make an effort with the strength we have. The Lord puts it in the negative, but the call is there. Are we selling the poor for a pair of sandals? For a loaf of bread? Put that more positively: let's share our goods, our fortune, our wealth, with the poor, for ultimately we are in the same boat as they are: just bones in a pile! You know, we encountered one or two people each day begging. Many of them would come up in the outdoor restaurants, mumbling in French. We knew what they wanted, but we had little cash to help, and couldn't understand what they were saying. So they would go to other tables, where the French people would reach into their pockets or purses and pull out a few coins and give them to them. The gospel was enacted all around us, every day.

Well preacher, this is certainly depressing! But wait! Let's not forget the promise of Jesus. In the Epistle reading for today, from Colossians, we read, about Jesus Christ:

He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head  
of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead,  
so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him  
all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was  
pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making  
peace through the blood of his cross.

So all the disconnected dusty bones will come together, because of Jesus Christ. He holds all things together. He will never forsake us nor leave us desolate. He will not leave us forgotten, but remembers and cherishes us forever! Just as we remember those who have gone before us, so he remembers us all, with a love that never dies.

We will die, and perhaps our bones will lie forgotten in some grave, forgotten by everyone who knows us and loves us. There seems to be no ultimate reason in this life. But there is a purpose. We don't have to give up, to give in. We can live life fully and joyfully.

Jesus calls us not to live under the fear of death, but to revel in the love of God. Jesus calls us to live in the power of God. You see, even though we die, we will live, in the presence of God, forever! That's the promise.

Through our work as we dwell in this promise the poor will be cared for, the hungry will find food, the homeless will be sheltered, those who need a shower will be given one, and a change of clothes. Those who are afraid and confused will be welcomed and listened to. All of this in the name of Jesus!

And he gives us his body and blood to feed upon, symbolically, metaphorically, literally, - however you want to believe it — so that we will be strengthened and made ready for the work ahead of us.

Thanks be to God! Amen