

Braxton Shelley: Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, oh Lord my strength and my redeemer. Words worth seeing. In the 1955 William James Lectures, the British philosopher, J.L. Austin called scholarly attention to the kinds of actions that can be performed through speech. This theory of speech acts would be posthumously published under the title *How to do things with words*. Austin's generative insights into the forces that utterances can unleash, offer a much needed corrective to a pervasive myth. A lie captured in the following phrase, sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me. This faulty philosophy of language underestimates the power of words and it overlooks the terrible things words are often used to do. I don't know about you, my friends, but these days I sometimes feel as if I am drowning, submerged in a sea, a sea of words. Words not in the form of books or articles, but words that find my eyes and ears often against my will. Words that echo through poisonous presidential proclamations. Words that circulate in venomous viral videos.

Braxton Shelley: Words shaped into tweets and posts and means and gifts, words whose thing power gets weaponized in destructive ways. These words can sometimes inflict more harm than mere sticks or stones. But while it is easy and necessary to bemoan the debasement of our national, international and interpersonal discourse, the question that grips me today moves in a slightly different direction. I want to ask today, what ought we be doing with our words? What words, I wonder are worth saying? The lesson read from Ezekiel's 37th chapter offers a valuable set of responses to this most pressing question, a few timeless insights that speak to our moment with a haunting kind of accuracy. The scene before us comes from a pivotal point in Ezekiel's prophecy, the moment when after decades of seeing devastation, decades of predicting pain, decades of foretelling doom, the prophet receives a new insight. In the section of Ezekiel's oracle, one finds a kind of prophetic modulation, a turn towards hope, a turn towards prophecies of restoration.

Braxton Shelley: After Ezekiel spoke life to charred ruins, to clogged wells, to dis-inhabited cities, to sites that had been visited with such great violence, then the prophet was taken on a journey, not to some blissful wonderland, nor to some fount of eschatological delight. No, the prophet was taken up and then set down in a low place, in a valley full of bones. Put yourself for a moment in Ezekiel's shoes. Imagine standing in the valley looking all around you. Finding that for as far as your eyes can see, you see nothing but the remains of destruction. Fragments of terminated human life. Bones picked clean by scavengers and bleached white by the sun. If you can imagine the eerie silence that must have saturated this macabre scene, then you can also grasp the significance of the first words spoken in this location. The conversation that took place here between the prophet, the divine and the bones has much to teach us about what we ought be doing with our words today.

Braxton Shelley: The text offers a few lessons about the kind of words that are worth saying. First, Ezekiel offers words that inform, words that inform. The Prophet finding

himself in this scene of human and ecological devastation takes a walk around the vast abyss, during which he arrives at two observations, two findings. First, he notes that the bones are very in great quantity and secondly, he notes that the bones are very dry. While the statements might seem gratuitous, since we've already been told this is a valley filled with bones, I want to suggest that Ezekiel's chosen words needed to be uttered. These are words that inform, words whose spiritual insight begins with speaking the ugly truth. Words that remind us that truth telling is a spiritual act. With this story, this story about resurrection, about resurrection, about restoration, about revivification. This is a story about new life, but it doesn't begin until the prophet spends time counting bones. Messy work, yes, but holy work too.

Braxton Shelley: Ezekiel's actions in this ancient scene clarify the responsibility that is ours today. We are called to insistently inform each other about all the ways our body politic has come to resemble a valley full of bones. Those are words where it's worth saying. One would like to know what happened to the bones? What brought them to their present state? What calamity, what catastrophe, what disaster befell them? Did they ignore the signs of a warming planet? Did they dismissed the sounds of malignant rhetoric? Did they disdain the prospect of beloved community? This information about their situation helps us see the things that could have a similar impact on us. Things we need to talk about. We need to talk about rampant racism and resurgent nationalism. We need to talk about police brutality and mass incarceration. We need to talk about economic exploitation and income inequality. We need to talk about it.

Braxton Shelley: We need to talk about sexism and colorism. We need to talk about climate change and environmental racism. We need to talk about xenophobia and Islamophobia and homophobia and transphobia. We need to talk about it. We need to talk about those things that produce and perpetuate devastation and destruction. We need to talk about it. We need to write about it. We need to speak about it. We need to preach about it. We need to shine the light of knowledge in the dark corners of our society, and as we do it, we need to boldly proclaim that facts still matter. Data still matters. Science still matters. Dare I say it, higher education still matters. If we want to speak words worth saying, they need to be words that inform. That's what Ezekiel did in the valley, but that was not the only kind of speaks that took place there. For after Ezekiel recounted the number and the condition of the bones, then the divine spoke up with a question which suggests to us a second kind of word we ought be saying these days are words that interrogate. Words that interrogate.

Braxton Shelley: The question God asked was, "Mortal, can these bones live? Mortal, Can the bones live?" Which is to say person susceptible to death, can death be undone. I love this question and questions like it because they index a strange situation. When our [inaudible 00:09:04] poses an interrogative, one that points past the answer to a deeper kind of wisdom. God asks, "Can the bones live?" This was a question about finality. A question about possibility. A question we need to hang out with in this our complicated moment. For after we have called

individual and collective attention to the bones that litter the landscape of our lives, then we ought to ask ourselves what we think about the bones we are confronted with. The question God asks in the scene, it names and critiques the temptation towards despair. The strong pull towards accepting the bones present condition as their final arrangement.

Braxton Shelley: While it's tempting to skip directly from this question to the resurrection that the text promises, I want to linger for just a second in the space between the divine's question and the bones revival. For it was in this liminal space that the prophet voiced an unusually timid response to God's question. Ezekiel said, "Oh Lord God you know." Which is to say, "I don't know." In contrast to the prophetic zeal and imaginative urgency, we find in Ezekiel's other oracles, this scene of devastation made God's question hard for the prophet to answer. And if I'm honest today, I can identify with the Ezekiel. I get the reason for the prophet's uncertainty because it's not always easy to predict the downfall of entrenched systems of domination. It's not easy to confidently foretell the ascendance of the downtrodden. In fact, it frightens me to hear easy insurances that things will work out or that things will get better because they always do because sometimes this gleeful assurance produces dangerous inaction.

Braxton Shelley: That's why there's such a great need for words that inquire. We need to interrogate not just the structures and powers that trample people under foot, but also the collective imagination that could leave those structures unchallenged. We need to ask ourselves, can these bones live? Can Destruction be undone? Is otherwise possible? We need to ask ourselves will white nationalism have the final say? Will greedy indifference to planetary crisis have the final word? Is resistance worth mounting? Is faith worth keeping? What kind of life is worth living? In this moment, our tweets, our posts, our speeches, our essays, they ought to be full of questions that interrogate what is pointing us towards what might be. Indeed, that was the force of the question god asked. The question about the bones. It shifted the focus from their present state to their possible future.

Braxton Shelley: But there was still a need for one further kind of word. Words that inspire. Words that inspire. After the aforementioned question and answer, the words we hear, they take the form of an instruction, a commandment to prophesy to the bones, to speak to the bones on God's behalf, to let the sound of Ezekiel's voice perform the work of revival. According to the scripture, the power of these words spoken to the prophet and then through the prophet was so great that the dry bones Ezekiel found in the valley were transformed into a living, breathing army. The words Ezekiel spoke brought the bones back to life. As such they are an exemplar of words that inspire. When I called these words that inspire, I aim to restore to that word some of this etymological foundation, is originary connection to breath. I'm interested in inspiration, in the notion of breathing into, of blowing upon, of filling, of animating, because that's what prophetic speech did in the text. That's what our words should be doing today.

Braxton Shelley: I'm proposing that we take words more seriously as sources of creative and transformative power. I'm proposing that we do this because creation and transformation are not the only options. Recent months have brought so many of us face to face with the destructive force that can be mediated by speech. We've witnessed words be used to incite violence, to multiply malice, to intensify hate. We've witnessed words be used to legislate evil, be recruited to order immorality, and besides responding to these things without rage, I want to suggest that these occurrences should remind us what words can do, and incite us to speak words that inspire. Instead of foolish mob-like chance to lock her up or send her back or build some wall, those who love justice should answer back with, "I believe her." "Black lives matter." "Love is love." And in so doing we will find that there are at our disposal words that inform, interrogate, and inspire all at the same time.

Braxton Shelley: Words like, "Ain't I a woman." Words like, "I have a dream." Words like, "Yes, we can." Words like, "There is a balm in Gilead." Words like, "We do not have to be as we are." Because really that's just an affirmative answer to the question, mortal, can the bones live? If we are to live, we must look at those with whom we share the planet and imagine a life lived together. If we are to live, we need to fill our mouths with words like the lyric to David Frazier's Gospel song. The word say, I need you. You need me. We're all a part of God's body. Stand with me. Agree with me. We're all a part of God's body. It is God's will that every need be supplied. You are important to me. I need you to survive.

Braxton Shelley: The bridge says, I pray for you. You pray for me. I love you. I need you to survive. I won't harm you with words from my mouth. I love you. I need you to survive. There are then so many words we might say to affirm the worth and lift up the life of our neighbors. The question is what, what will you say?