

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Gospel: John 11:1-45

The Prophet Ezekiel writes in exile. Taken from his native land along with others when the Babylonian Empire conquered Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, he writes this text ten years later, in 586 BCE, when the Babylonians returned to a rebellious Jerusalem and flattened the city, including the Temple- the visible sign of God's dwelling on earth.

Ezekiel and the other exiles sit in Babylon. Staring into a future that seemed to swallow them up whole. The key theological realities of their faith; the monarchy, the Temple, the very land itself and their presence on it- were all gone. They are in a crisis of faith. Their very identity and their understanding of God and God's activity in the world were upended. The Israelites struggled to make sense of it all. To orient themselves to this new reality, their place in it, God's place in it.

Ezekiel, a prophet of God, struggles as well. But God grants him a vision, one immortalized in that childhood song for many of us. A valley filled with "dry bones". The language used is meant to convey total lack of any life. As one commentator put it, "This is not Westly in the Princess Bride who is only "mostly dead". This is totally d-e-d dead. Without any viable DNA. The desolate valley of dry bones are what Ezekiel and his fellow exiles feel

about their own fate and the fate of all Jews. It is a devastatingly expressive image of hopelessness.

A hopelessness that is echoed by Martha when she tells Jesus not to open the tomb, for her brother has been dead four days and the body is already beginning to stink of decay. The specificity of four days is important, Jews understood that the soul had not truly left the body until after three days. At four days, Lazarus was not “mostly dead” he was totally d-e-d, dead. There was no hope left for life to come. Period.

I last preached this text three years ago. Do you remember that time? Even now it fades in our memories. COVID. On March 19 2020, California was the first state to issue a stay at home order. Hospitals were beginning to become overwhelmed with the sick. Governor Reynolds had just signed an emergency declaration that prevented mass gatherings- restaurants, bars, churches. This was but the beginning.

Our world has been transformed in these past 3-4 years. It is not the same as being invaded, violently torn from your home, taken to another land as hostages. But, just the same, the theological, sociological, and societal foundations have shifted underneath us. Sometimes seemingly disappeared. Left us dis-oriented. Unsure

of where we stand anymore. With God, with our neighbors, with the world around us. Anyone feel that way?

Perhaps it is because we have been so isolated here in the United States, safe behind our two oceans even as we waged a war on terror. Safe behind the illusion that we were safe because we were better. We had better tech, better health care, were better people; smarter, stronger, more righteous. Could handle anything that came at us on our own. And COVID pulled the rug out from under us. Showed us how fragile we really were. The weaknesses in how we live.

I think this is the root of our societal anxiety that has been expressed in increased division, impatience and mistrust of one another, senseless violence, the consistent breaking of the 8th commandment against bearing false witness through despicable/dangerous public language about one another.

The cries of false prophets from all sides that almost gleefully describe an apocalypse of death and destruction of all that is right and good because of "them"! A finger pointed at our very neighbors because they are different. A message that we drink like someone dying of thirst on the ocean who drinks sea water. A message that when consumed will only speed the very thing we seek to avoid. Oblivion.

Do you feel it, some days? This sense of hopelessness that Ezekiel, and Mary, and Martha must have felt. That there is nothing left to fix.

As he stares across this desolate valley God asks Ezekiel, "Can these dry bones live?" It is the question of whether there is still hope. Ezekiel responds in faith, "O Lord, only you alone know this."

I wonder if that is the moment when God decides? I wonder if that is the moment God was waiting for. Because God then tells Ezekiel to do both the ridiculous and the impossible. Prophecy to the bones. Speak to them. Tell them that the Lord God will lay sinews and flesh on them, cause breath to enter them, and they shall live.

And Ezekiel does what God has commanded, he prophesies to the bones, speaking God's impossible word to them. Just as God did in Genesis, when God spoke order out of the chaos, breathed life into the dirt- now God's word- through Ezekiel- brings life again. And the bones come together. Knit anew into human beings.

God says to Ezekiel, see, I have reached even into the grave that you thought had buried you and your nation. I have raised them, not restored them as much as re-created them. God put a new

heart, and a new spirit within them; so that they would follow God alone. God, whose steadfast love endures forever, does this because that is who God is. And within a generation, God's people will be back in the Promised Land. Will re-build the Temple. The foundations of their lives re-set.

And it doesn't stop there, just look at the Gospel reading. Mary and Martha sit in mourning for their brother. Inconsolable. "If only you had been here my brother would not have died." Again, God asks a question, "Do you believe your brother will rise again?" Can these dry bones live?

Jesus promises, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" And Martha's response is not as hedged as the prophet Ezekiel but a statement of faith that breaks forth, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world." This is what Ezekiel and the Jews come to understand as they struggled to find their footing in exile. This is what Martha believed and then BELIEVED when her beloved brother Lazarus came out of the tomb. That our only hope- of salvation, of safety, of life that truly is life, is in the God who so loved the world God sent God's son Jesus into the world not to condemn it, but to save it.

We will not be saved by owning the libs or shaming the conservatives. We will not be saved by buying another gun or speaking the right words. We will not be saved by anything anyone else is selling you.

The only thing that saves is God's Word. Which breathes life into what looks dead. And that Word is Jesus. That Word is love. Loving God, first. With all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Not our political party, or denomination, or country. Not our ingenuity or capacity. Loving God, who breathed life into Adam and knit Eve from his rib. Who brought Israel out of exile.

The only thing that will save is loving our neighbor with the same wild abandon that God in Jesus loved us. A love that is willing to turn the other cheek, heal, feed, clothe, listen. That sees the beauty of the image of God that resides in each of them. Even when they seek to destroy us.

This is our hope! Our only hope! Because only God's word can breathe dry bones into life again. Because only God's word can call forth the dead, "Lazarus, come out!" Only God can take a desolate valley of death and turn it into green pastures and still waters.

This is our only hope, because I have seen the power of that love. I saw it in my Nana, who trusted in her Lord Jesus even when she no longer knew what she was here for. I see it in the volunteers at Matthew 25 who feed not only bodies but souls as well. I see it in countless lives transformed by an encounter with the living Christ. Who have felt the life-giving breath of God re-create them. Resurrect their lives from the pit. I have felt that life giving breath of God on my own cheek. When I was lost in myself in my first semester of college. In the loneliness of my teens. In the midst of my divorce. During the hell of Erik's death and the awfulness of my brother in law's cancer.

The only thing that saves. That strengthens. That gives hope. New life. That leads to something better, is God's word. Jesus. Listen to him. Follow him. Look to him. Be like him. Receive him. Rest in him. Trust in him. And you will live. Not just you but ya'll. All ya'll.

Come, hear this Word, bathe in these waters, share this Meal. Receive this love, grace, forgiveness. Rest beside still waters. And God will do beautiful things.

Thanks be to God.