

Lent 5 March 29 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, John 11:1-45

The Prophet Ezekiel writes in exile. Taken from his native land along with others by the Babylonian Empire in 597 BCE when they conquered Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Ten years later, in 586, the Babylonian Empire returned to a rebellious Jerusalem and flattened the city, including the Temple- the visible sign of God's dwelling on earth, God's covenant with the Jews.

Ezekiel and the other exiles hear about this as they sit in Babylon, living- yes- but ripped from everything they knew. Now, staring into a future that seemed to threaten to swallow them whole. Without a trace. The key symbols of their faith; Jerusalem, the Temple, the very land itself and their presence in it- were all gone. And in the theology of the time the people wondered, has their God been defeated by the god of the Babylonians? Is there no hope at all of ever being who they once were?

Ezekiel, wonders as well. But God comes to Ezekiel, God's prophet, and grants him a vision, one immortalized in that childhood song for many of us. A valley filled with "dry bones". The language 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. The bones represent what Ezekiel and his fellow exiles feel about their own fate and the fate of all Jews. It is an awful and apt expression of hopelessness.

As they gaze on this valley, God asks Ezekiel, can these dry bones live? Ezekiel must be married because he knows this is a loaded question, his response is the right one, “O Lord, only you know this.”

And then God asks Ezekiel to do both the ridiculous and the impossible. Prophecy to the bones. Speak my Word to them. Tell them that the Lord God will cause breath to enter them, and they shall live. That the Lord God will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.

Ezekiel does what God has commanded; the ridiculous, the impossible, and he prophesies to the bones, speaking God’s word to them. And they tremble and move, they begin to come together. Being knit anew into a people.

God says to Ezekiel, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They have said, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." But, see, God says, I have reached even into the grave that you thought had buried you and your nation. I have raised them. God, through Ezekiel's prophesy, had done what God has promised to do twice earlier in this book- give God's chosen people a new heart, and put a new spirit within them; so that they would follow God.

God does not restore the Israelites as much as God re-creates them. They will eventually return to the Promised Land of Israel almost 60 years after their first exile. They will build a new temple and a new city. They will be God's people, but they are forever changed by their exile. It's imprint, and the restoration of their hope by God, permanently stamped upon their faith.

The Psalmist sings a similar refrain, "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord." I wait for you, O Lord. My soul waits for you with more eagerness and searching than even the night sentry just before the dawn. I search, I wait, for your coming in response to my cries. The Psalmist sings of faith even in the deep darkness. A trust in the steadfast love of the Lord. A hope in the God who comes to our cry.

The Gospel reading continues this pattern. Mary and Martha sit in mourning for their brother. Isolated by grief, they welcome the presence of Jesus when he comes. Each expresses the same sentiment to Jesus, "If only you had been here, my brother would not have died." An accusation? A simple statement of fact? Of faith? I think you hear that however you are feeling at the moment.

They go with him to the very edge of the tomb. To the very edge of death. And then, Jesus, God's self-expression to us... weeps. God looks upon the pain and suffering of God's broken creation and cries and cries. And Jesus, seeing with God's eyes, acts with God's power- calling forth Lazarus who everyone knew was dead. Calling forth life and hope into the midst of that which seemed lifeless and hopeless.

Do you hear any echoes of our own lives right now in these texts? As we are over our heads and out of our depth, as we are exiled from the life that we thought we had been promised, as we gaze upon a future that seems our own valley of dry bones- we cry to God.

And our hope is what our ancestors of the faith bear witness to. The Good News is this... God comes. God hears. God weeps with

us, moved deeply by the pain and suffering God sees. And in the midst of it all, God acts.

For when God gazes upon what seems dead beyond re-calling-dry bones, a people in exile, Lazarus- God sees possibility. For God can breathe new life into it. God can create a new thing. In God, and God alone, lies hope. The hope of the psalmist in God's steadfast, never moving, love for us and all of God's creation. The hope and trust of Mary and Martha who even in the midst of their complaint/their statement of fact- "If you had been here..."- also express trust in Jesus.

But note well, how does this re-creation come about? For Ezekiel for Mary and Martha, the first requirement is that we faithful stand with God and look at the situation at its worst. Walk with God in the valley of dry bones, to the edge of the tomb.

Remember- Ezekiel is no mere spectator to the reanimation of the bones, but is the agent through whom the transformation is affected. He speaks the Word into a space where there is, seemingly, none to hear. But his speaking creates hearing (through the power of God's Word). His speaking unleashes the power of God's Holy Spirit to move and stir bringing new life into the lifeless things. Raising up something new.

God does this through Ezekiel, and I'm not even sure he believes anything will take place when he speaks. Martha for sure believes all that will come of this opening of the tomb is exposure to the stench of death. But, sure or not, Ezekiel still speaks the Word. Martha still waits by Jesus' side as he cries for Lazarus to come out. And they and all those around them are rewarded for that faith even in the midst of doubt. For they see the signs of God's promise and power- that in a world of death and destruction God will restore life. That God can breathe new life into anything and anyone, including now. That in God alone lies hope.

I am inspired by Ezekiel, Mary, and Martha because they were people just like us. They display different depths of faith in Jesus, even active doubt. And yet, God uses them to bring life out of death. God uses them, to bear witness to God's power to free us from all that binds us- fear, sin, death, the desire to cling to what has gone. I am inspired, because one of the ways God works to bring hope, that God works to re-create a future, is through God's people.

This is our story. For we are a people claimed by God in the waters of baptism, through the Holy Spirit soaring into our lives through the Word- spoken and read. God calls us to be faithful in our proclamation of the Word, the good news of God's love for us

and all of creation. God calls us to be faithful in this task even when we see little prospect of success. Why? Because the Spirit of God can work through that perseverance to bring about miraculous things.

I have to admit my friends that I first looked at these texts and thought, you've got to be kidding me. But as I read and reflected on them they inspired me. I pray they inspire you.

So, even as we cry to God out of our depths and wait for God, we know that God stands with us. That God is already acting in and through us. In the ways big and small that we already are proclaiming a Word of life, now. As we love one another through skype and zoom. As we sew masks. As we put decorations on doors. As we re-connect with family and friends. In the ways big and small that we are already proclaiming a hope and a future. For we have a hope and a future because God has promised that. We don't know what it will look like. But we know that God and God's people will be present in it. For at the end, our God is a God of resurrection and of hopefulness.