

Lent: Breathing Life Into Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14 John 11:1-45
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I'm going to jump right into this sermon because I don't want that message to pop up asking if you're still watching. ☺

The assigned lectionary Gospel reading for this 5th Sunday in Lent is another very long story in the Book of John. Chapter 11 tells the story of Martha and Mary grieving over the recent death of their brother, Lazarus. Jesus had been summoned to heal Lazarus, but he delayed his arrival. When Jesus is challenged that if he had been there in time, Lazarus would not have died, the gospel writer puts on the lips of Jesus the famous passage, one often used at memorial and gravesite services, "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."

This powerful statement is meant as a word of hope, especially to those who grieve, declaring that there is life after this life. This story also speaks compassionately about Jesus' sorrow over the death of his friend. It contains the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept." It serves, therefore, as a **testament to God's compassion and sorrow in the loss of human life.**

In dramatic fashion, this story ends with the words, "Jesus cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!' The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, 'Unbind him, and let him go.'" While Jesus is responsible for the raising of Lazarus, it is the action of Lazarus' family, friends and the community that frees him from being bound. Persons who are bound that tight cannot free themselves on their own, they need help. **Our part, therefore, as a community of faith, is to help remove that which binds others, helping to release them from that which entombs them.** Jesus gives us a crucial and active role in helping to bring liberation, wholeness, freedom, and new life to others, especially each other.

Being entombed and bound, metaphorically, can mean by things such as sin, or alienation, or prejudice, or oppression, or addiction, or poverty, or loneliness, or physical and mental health issues, or even fear. So, let me ask:

- What entombs and binds the ones you love? How can you help unbind them?
- What entombs and binds you? How can others help unbind you?
- What entombs and binds our political, social, and religious structures and systems? How can we help unbind them?

All this leads to a reflection upon the unique situation we find ourselves in today at this point in time, as individuals, as this community of faith, as this country, and as this world. This coronavirus pandemic is certainly leaving most of us feeling entombed and

bound. To address these issues, I want to turn to the assigned lectionary Old Testament reading for this Sunday, **Ezekiel 37:1-14**. It's one of the more memorable scenes in the Bible, known as **The Valley of the Dry Bones**. Listen for a word from God to you, and to us as a community of faith.

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. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I 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."

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. 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. Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

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

May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word. Like the story of the raising of Lazarus, this is one of God calling forth and bringing new life and restoration. Yes, these passages are meant to be a glimpse of Easter, a foreshadowing of hope, a cause for rejoicing. And yes, we need to hear these words today as our social distancing grows, our sense of being in exile. Actually, a better description is physical distancing, because we need to remember the importance of social connection during the current expansion of sheltering in place and stay home orders, and as more people get sick, and layoffs increase, and anxiety heightens. Therefore, it should not be hard to see ourselves, as individuals, but especially as a community, of those lying in that Valley of Dry Bones.

Importantly, the biblical context of this story is that the nation of Israel had been defeated by the Babylonian Empire and taken into exile, away from Jerusalem and their temple, which had been destroyed. A valley filled with bones is not an exaggeration of those in exile, forced away from their place of worship. So, God asks,

"O mortal, can these bones live?" In other words, **do those in exile have a future? Can a community that is displaced prosper in its home again? This story is about impending homecoming. It is about God's ability to breathe the Spirit of new life into a community even when it still finds itself separated and in exile.**

This biblical text has long been used as a message of hope, encouragement, and actual empowerment to those particular communities of people throughout time who have found themselves oppressed, impoverished, enslaved, held captive, separated by and from the majority, the ones in power. But in this specific time and place of worldwide pandemic, this story has meaning for us, for our community of faith, like never before.

I speak often of the importance of seeking to recognize and experience the Sacred Presence of God in our midst and within ourselves. So, let me ask: How are you, right now, during this time of exile, starting to hear bones rattle and come together, starting to see them covered with sinews, muscle, and flesh, starting to see the Spirit breathe in new life?

Today, we have been given a vision of a promise of life. We have been given a glimpse of the revival to come, a restoration of the community of faith – our community of faith – indeed of all of God's people, all of God's creation. We may currently find ourselves in exile, we may find ourselves entombed and bound, but there remains this promise of return, of a homecoming, of the community being restored. May this good news bring you hope and new life, even as we await our homecoming reunion.

We may not mark Holy Week or celebrate Easter in our sanctuary this year, but nothing will prevent Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the rolling away of the stone from the empty tomb. Nothing. While we do not know when we will return to our church buildings in person, or when we will get back to work in our offices, or find grocery stores with fully stocked shelves, or the medical profession obtain all the resources they need, we can move forward knowing that dry bones will find new life. In the meantime, this in between time, we will continue to weep with those who weep, mourn the mounting communal losses together, and call on God so that we can live in hope. Yes, we are still in the valley of dry bones, but rest assured, even though we walk through the valley of deep darkness, we need not fear evil, for God is with us.

Listen for those bones start to rattle, and eventually come together, full of life.
Amen.

Resource:
Feasting on the Word
 Jill Duffield, 5th Sunday in Lent, *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 3-23-20.