

Open Eyes for Open Lives

a sermon based on

Ezekiel 37:1-14

(with reference to John 11:1-45)

and delivered on

March 29 2020

5th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

Copyright © 2020 Rev. Mark A Harkness

Let's turn back to that passage from Ezekiel – the valley of the dry bones. What images came to your mind as you heard Ezekiel describe what he saw? The image that has been burned into my mind as long as I can remember is an apocalyptic image of bones scattered across a wasteland: dry, cracked earth; rocks scattered about, the sky is overcast and not even a single weed dares to sprout from the ground. The air is eerily still: so still that it's sour. There on this barren landscape are the bones of God's people: dry... long dead bones so dry that even if a gentle breeze might come it would pulverize those bones into dust.

What a happy image: huh? I don't know why that's the image that sticks in my head. Was it a picture on Sunday School worksheet years ago? Is it from a painting? I did a search on Google for images of the valley of dry bones and those are the sort of images that turned up. Doesn't matter how it got in here (my noggin), it's there.

But how do we get here? To this place where Ezekiel even has the vision? Ezekiel was priest of Israel. He along with others like Daniel had been taken away in exile to Babylonia by Nebuchadnezzar, unlike the prophet Jeremiah who remained in Jerusalem and for all his whining encouraged the people in exile to hold onto hope and to live into the promise even in the midst of the current strife.

Ezekiel's message was a little different. Ezekiel basically told the people that they'd had it coming. They had abandoned the proper worship of the LORD GOD. Even though he was a priest, he pointed to the flawed thinking that God could only be properly worshipped in one place. He chastised them for bastardizing their faith by including influences from the idolatrous practices around them. He pointed to the exile as evidence that the people's confidence in having been chosen by God provided some sort of talisman against hardship or even losing it all. Ezekiel is one happy character. {sarcasm}

He had good reason to be that way. People had abandoned God. Like so many of us, they only turned to God when all hell was breaking out around them. They hedged their bets with other deities. Then, when things didn't resolve as they hoped they blamed God. Sound familiar?

You made a promise to be our God. You owe us. I accepted Jesus into my heart. I said that prayer. I think that I even meant it when I did. I even end all my prayers with the magic words, "in Jesus' name;" but you didn't do what I wanted or asked. It's your fault, God.

Let's look back at the story from the Gospel today. Jesus arrives in Bethany where his dear friend Lazarus has died. His (Lazarus') sisters - first the eldest, Martha, rushes to greet Jesus. What are the first words out of her mouth? "I'm so glad you're here.?" Nope. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (Jn 11:21) She tries to cover her tone a little bit by saying she knows that whatever Jesus asks will be done and that she has hope in Lazarus' life in the resurrection. Still the implication is there: This is your fault. If you had rushed back here when we sent word, Lazarus would still be alive like I want him to be alive.

Martha then tells Mary, the younger sister, that Jesus has arrived. Remember this is the Mary who sat at his feet and listened to him. Because of that experience, she's comes to Jesus with a better attitude. Right? "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." (Jn 11:32) Jesus has got to be feeling really welcome at this point. Don't you think?

Now let's look at the situation. Jesus got word that Lazarus was sick. (Jn 11:3) He waited two days. (Jn 11:6) Bethany is about a day's walk from the areas surrounding Jerusalem, where he was at the time. Let's do the math. He waited two days, he walked one day: which adds up to three days. Right? The messengers would have walked a day to tell him. That makes four days. How long had Lazarus been dead before Jesus got there? Four days. Right?

So how was it Jesus' fault for not doing anything, if he didn't even get word until Lazarus was already dead? Do you see where I'm going, here?

Why is it always God's fault when things go wrong in our lives or the world around us, when so often we live the axiom "When all else fails, pray.?" When all else fails.

When I think of those bones that Ezekiel saw in the valley, I wonder: how many of them had been riddled with osteoporosis before the flesh decayed and they lay there barren? That's what Ezekiel had been getting at. That's what Ezekiel had been trying to get the people to see. God hadn't abandoned them. God hadn't quit listening, but the people had neglected God. They cry out, "Help me. I'll be better," but too late. Sort of like novice skydiver so confident in his own abilities that he merely nods to the instructors before jumping out of the plane when he realizes that his parachute is still in the plane. "Help me. It's your responsibility to keep me safe," he demands.

Then – the Lord imparts this vision into Ezekiel's psyche – not just a thought but a deep awareness. God shows him a valley filled with dry bones. God asks, "Can these bones live?" (v.3) Like biblical scholar, Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, I too wonder what inflection Ezekiel used when he replied. Was he confident, "O LORD GOD, you know.?" Was he more hesitant and doubtful, "O LORD GOD, you know.?"

But when the LORD GOD says, speak to these dry bones as I say and they will put on flesh and take on breath and live, Ezekiel listens. Not only that he actually speaks the words of the LORD GOD to the bones. They listen. First, the foot bones connected to the ankle bones, then the ankle bones to the shin bones, then the shin bones to the knee bones. {Aside: That song's copyrighted, so I'd better stop here.} You get the point. Pretty soon, these bone are connected together and covered in flesh. No longer is the valley filled with dry bones, but with piles of corpses.

If it stopped here, what would happen? Dry bones, they are a coming. Right? But now God says, speak to the breathe and from the winds of the four corners of the earth breath filled those bodies and they were vivified! They came alive.

Does any of this sound familiar? You know: that story about how God created the man, and then gave him life with the breath of his spirit? You have heard that one. Right? And where did that happen? Was it on a barren lunar landscape devoid of life and atmosphere? No. It was in a lush garden bounded by the Tigris and Euphrates among others: maybe not too far from where Babylon resided along the banks of the Euphrates. God formed and breathed life into human beings not amidst desolation and discouragement, but in the center of If flourishing promise.

So, I wonder if our images of that valley are all wrong. Yes, the bodies had decayed. Yes, the bones had dried out. If God really had abandoned them, maybe they were lying there on dry cracked earth. But what if the valley which Ezekiel beheld was filled with flowers and grasses – a meadow teaming with butterflies and promise? In a way, that might have been more disheartening, because it would be more evidence of just how easily the people could have claimed their place with God, but also a comfort to know that our neglect to claim or recognize the provision that God provides won't change God's nature to provide.

When confronted with a hopeless cause – one that no man could rectify – Ezekiel listened to God – and spoke to God's people what he was told. Even though he wouldn't have thought of it himself, he was willing to accept that God could indeed bring life to the driest of bones that would hear his voice.

One of my colleagues, Scott Field, served his first church for over thirty years. In The United Methodist Church, that's a long appointment. I asked him once, how he managed to stay in that one church so long. He told me that he'd been appointed to the church to close it. He just hadn't been successful. As a young pastor, fresh out of seminary, he did something bold. He asked the congregation if they wanted it to die. They realized that to live they couldn't keep doing the same things that got them to that place. Instead, they began to listen for and speak the word of God.

That doesn't mean that they had to give the world more what it said that it wanted but with a Christian spin.

I'd say that much of what happened was that instead of blaming God or the changing world around them for what was happening and talking at God about what they wanted, they started to talk with God and to do what he asked.

That doesn't always happen. I know a small rural – non-denomination – congregation that a few years ago called a retired minister to be their pastor and clearly stated that his job was to keep the church open long enough for each of them to have their funerals.

Is that what we expect from God? I hope not.

No matter worn out or fragile your bones feel, they still have flesh. No matter how easy it is to lose your breath. You are still breathing. No matter how desperate things seem in the world, whether it be political strife, pandemics, or just general depravity, that you are also surrounded with grasses and flowers and butterflies flitting around each and every one of us with promise.

Hear mortal, the LORD GOD says I will clothe you in glory so that you too make speak words of life.

God didn't tell Ezekiel to scorn the bones for being bones. That was Ezekiel's personality: not God's. Instead, God said speak words of life. Tell these bones that they have purpose and are worthwhile. Tell these bones to breathe: not just to inhale but breathe out the promise I have for others.

The times when I have felt most alive are not those moments of thrilling adventure, but when I have had the privilege of bringing joy and hope and promise to another. That is what leads to life.

Let us no longer claim that the church is in decline because the world doesn't get us, or has rejected us. Remember God didn't send the Son to the world to condemn the world – Jesus didn't go to the cross to condemn – but to bring life.. Instead, let us claim the life that comes not with pointing out failure, but by sharing the word of the LORD GOD which helps to restore what has fallen apart with an eye towards the life God sees.

And let's do it with confidence because God has given us the words and his word. AMEN.