

5 Lent, Yr. A

April 2, 2017

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

This Ezekiel reading is read at the Easter Vigil, but also every third year in the Lectionary cycle. On one level, it can bring a smile, since almost all of us have sung “Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones,” at some point in our younger lives. That does not, by the way, appear in the hymnal! And then there are the skeleton jokes, like, did you hear about the skeleton who walks into a bar and says, “Give me a beer – and a mop”?

But read on a serious level, this scripture has profound things to say to us. It's a reflection on hope as opposed to despair and on life as opposed to death. I've mentioned before the idea about seeing the entire arc of the Bible – which bends toward righteousness and love, but which also tells a story of hope over and against despair. The patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are seen, in those early stories, as having hope in what appear to be impossible situations. They come up against seemingly dead ends. Abraham is promised many descendants, but his wife is barren. He's promised a land but never gets there. Often it seems like God's promises are flummoxed by human misunderstanding and limitations, but at least one story line here is that God's intentions are not defeated by human actions. God, from the very beginning, has willed the well-being of all creation, and God is a Being who makes and keeps promises and one who creates new possibilities when humans have reached apparent dead-ends. As we've often heard, when a door closes, God opens a window. Hope is connected to God's basic assurances to us that there is a future. But, especially in the Hebrew Scriptures, there's plenty of evidence that we can place our hopes in the wrong places. Those hopes, like hopes in armies and riches, the writers tell us, are misplaced and futile. The only basis and the basis for our ultimate confidence is in God alone. We can rely on God's steadfast love, his promises, his creative power and his desire for our well-being. Resting on those things and trusting them, we can wait, in patience and in trust, despite circumstances. Hope isn't a denial of reality, although we've seen, in the case of each and every prophet, that there are always competing voices, false prophets, trying to pull us in the other direction.

And never more so than when the message is unpalatable, when the prophet points out human failures to live out God's will. Then the reassurances of the false prophets are loud: don't worry, all is OK, do whatever you like. God's not paying attention anyway.

Ezekiel's career as a prophet was no exception to that pattern. He's in the southern kingdom of Judah. The Babylonians' first victory against Judah occurred in 597 B.C. and, following that victory, they took captives back to Babylon. They took not only the cream of the crop, including Ezekiel, but also the King – the last Davidic king. But, back in Jerusalem, in spite of all that, there was no reform – there was still injustice and corruption and toying with the worship of pagan gods. Then, in 587, the Babylonians were back and this time it was a final and complete victory. They destroyed the Temple, Jerusalem was left in rubble and the Davidic monarchy was over. All the remaining able-bodied people were taken to Babylon, including all the young men and women, all the artisans, the scholars, the professionals, the priests. All that was left were the rural poor, scraping a living from the ravaged land and some scavengers in Jerusalem.

One scholar has said that it's almost impossible to understand the impact this had on the nation – it was both a national disaster and a religious crisis. They had lost absolutely everything – the land promised to their ancestors and held since the time of Joshua and the focus of their religion, the temple where they knew God to be dwelling among them. And many of them undoubtedly lost all hope. Because while the prophets continually warned people to turn back to God, to follow God's ways, popular theology centered around the people's conviction that Jerusalem was God's dwelling place and, therefore, would always be safe and secure; it would never be destroyed. Another key part of their theology was the idea that we've spoken about before – that they were chosen and if being chosen meant anything at all, surely it meant that they would always be safe. So now, after this Babylonian destruction, not only were they faced with physical destruction, but also with a crisis of central beliefs: Wait a minute, who is this God, exactly, where was he when we needed him? Has he deserted us? Can we trust him? What does it mean to be chosen if it doesn't mean safety and security?

We can't fully understand what they must have felt, but we can try. Actually, I think we MUST try because unless we can understand and make connections to our current situations, reading and studying biblical texts becomes just an academic exercise, interesting, but sterile. So, we have to try to imagine and then connect with our own times. When I was writing this sermon, I thought that perhaps it would have been, for us, something like 9/11, except that that destruction would have been followed up by a conquering army. We would, no doubt, have been asking those same questions. And, as you will remember, many did after 9/11.

In the midst of these questions, we hear about Ezekiel's vision. All those dry bones, perhaps the skeletons of those defeated warriors, lying in the heat. But those bones were like the nation, dry and dead and seemingly completely finished. So when God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" his answer was kind of evasive – Lord, you are the one that knows – you can imagine that accompanied by a shrug. Then God tells him to prophesy to the bones, to tell them that they would live again, that the bones would come together and then be covered with flesh and skin and when Ezekiel obeyed, there was a noise, a rattling, as the bones all came together. And then, finally, God tells him to prophesy to the breath, that it should come and breathe into these not yet living creatures. And when they say, all hope is lost, tell them that the Lord God will open their graves, and fill them with his spirit and they shall live. The spirit of God that was breathed into them released them from despair, enlivened them with a new vision, a new sense of hope, a trust in restoration and return and a new assurance that God was indeed with them, in spite of everything.

The Ezekiel text functions as a crucial link in a theological chain. At one end is Genesis and the Garden of Eden, when God forms a human from the dust and breathes God's life into what then becomes a person. God's renewal of Israel was like a rerun of that creation story. Or, you could look at it the other way around: what God did for Israel would be the first act in what God would do for all the rest of humanity. And at the center of that chain stands Jesus. The most significant echo of this Ezekiel passage is in the NT when, after the crucifixion, Jesus comes into that closed room when

the disciples were hiding and the text tells us, “He breathed on them and said ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’”

But there’s also an obvious connection to John’s Gospel this morning, with the raising of Lazarus. Both the valley of dry bones and the tomb of Lazarus have the same message: God’s life-giving spirit can move people from despair to hope, from bondage to freedom, from death to life. While, as I pointed out earlier, none of us has known the kind of physical exile or destruction of identity that the Jewish people suffered, we have all surely known times when it felt like our lives, our dreams, were like dry, scattered bones, and we all have certainly known, whether in our own lives or in the lives of others, those things that keep us, as Lazarus was, tied in knots that might as well be burial clothes. Things like anxiety and anger and regret and fear. Things that keep us bound up, alienated and keep us from living that full life of joy that God intends for us. At those times we long to hear Jesus tell us to come forth to live again and to be freed from whatever bondage we are suffering. Sometimes we’re the one tied up and sometimes we’re the members of the community gathered around who can move to do the unbinding.

Not only today’s scripture, but our deepest faith attests that it’s all about the life and joy that God intends for each and every one of us – the kind of life we can choose, as Paul says, to live here and now and the kind of life we can trust that we will have for all eternity. Amen.