

5 Lent, Yr. A

March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45

For the third week in a row, I can say how amazing it is that the scriptures appointed for the day are totally relevant to our current situation. There are common themes running through all the readings: suffering and death, but also trust and hope, and finally new life in the spirit of God.

If we look first at the Ezekiel reading (and by the way, thanks to Jean and Paul for coming in and doing the readings this morning. You may know that this reading also appears at the Easter Vigil and it's been "Jean's" reading on that evening for these many years. Since we won't be doing the Vigil this year, it's hers to do this day!) And perhaps, with regard to this reading, which many of us remember from camp songs as "Dem Bones" it would be OK to offer a bit of humor – you know, the one where the skeleton walks into a bar and orders a drink – and a mop.

Back to the serious stuff. Some background is helpful in understanding the Ezekiel readings. You may remember that he was taken into exile when the Babylonians defeated Israel in 597 BCE. They took the cream of the crop, including Ezekiel, but also the king, the last of the

Davidic line. Before the final defeat, there had been two years in which the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem and that siege resulted in famine, disease and many deaths. Before they left, the conquerors destroyed the Temple and razed Jerusalem. And when they did leave, they took with them all the able-bodied people, including all the young men and women, all the artisans, all the scholars, the professionals, the priests. Left behind were the rural poor, scraping a living from the ravaged land, and some scavengers living in Jerusalem.

One scholar has said that it's almost impossible for us to get our heads around the enormity of the loss. It was a national disaster but also a religious crisis. They had lost everything – the land promised to their ancestors and held since the time of Joshua and the focus of their religion, the temple, where they were assured that God was dwelling with them. Part of their theology at the time was that because they were God's chosen, they would always be protected. So at this point, they are faced not only with death and physical destruction, but also with a crisis of faith: where is God when we need him? Has he deserted us? Can we trust him? Is it possible that the all-conquering Babylonians have a god that's bigger and stronger? Have we bet on the wrong horse? And what does it mean to be chosen anyway, if it doesn't guarantee safety and security? I suppose if you were going to put it

in the strongest terms the question really was WHAT GOOD IS GOD?

So, what we are looking at here is great suffering and a feeling of hopelessness, characterized in Ezekiel by that entire valley filled with dry bones. That's where we come in this morning, with God and Ezekiel in the middle of that valley. And when God asks, "Tell me, mortal, what do you think? Can these bones live?" I have to think that Ezekiel was tempted to say: no, the loss is too great, the destruction is too total. But, instead, he evades the question and turns it back to God – "O LORD GOD, YOU KNOW." And we know the rest, God tells him to prophesy to the bones – I WILL CAUSE BREATH TO ENTER INTO YOU AND YOU SHALL LIVE. And when he does, the bones come together and once the breath of God enters them, they live. Some see this as the first intimation of the resurrection of the dead in the Hebrew Scriptures. And it surely is a resurrection.

Stick with the image of God's breath filling them for a minute and remember that in the Hebrew that word is ruach and it can be translated as breath or wind, or spirit. God's breath is there at the creation, with the wind over the waters and then at the formation of humankind when God breathes his own life in the creature he has formed. It's also there in the NT in John's Gospel when Jesus, after the Resurrection, appears to his disciples and the

text says, “He breathed on them and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’” Surely it’s not too much of a stretch to say that the entire cosmos is enlivened with the breath of God – and what implications follow from that statement!

So there’s that pattern in this reading: suffering and death, followed by hope and trust, ending with God’s life.

The same pattern is in the psalm – “out of the depths, I have called,” the psalmist says, but then a statement of hope and trust, “I wait for the Lord; in his word is my hope” and finally that statement of new life in the form of redemption.

And then there’s the gospel with its anticipation of Jesus’ resurrection with the story of Jesus bringing Lazarus back from the dead. Once again, there’s the pattern: the suffering and death, then the hope and trust and finally the new life.

In the midst of our current situation when so many people are suffering, I’d like to pause and think about that one sentence: JESUS WEPT. There are lots of opinions about that: was he weeping because Lazarus was dead? Or because Martha and Mary were so unhappy that he hadn’t been there to save him? Or because he knew at this point that his time was limited and the circle of enemies was closing around him? Maybe all those things were true. But I wonder if he didn’t weep because of all

the horrible suffering in the world, much of it unnecessary because it's caused by human greed and selfishness and ignorance. Someone has said that what finally killed Jesus on the cross was a broken heart because he took all the suffering of the world into that heart and it was too much.

But then he calls Lazarus out of the grave into new life. Those bones also live again.

What does all this say to us?

For one thing, it calls us to see all the valleys of dry bones in our world today. We can see them literally, for instance, if we look at Syria or places in Africa or Italy and now the U.S. And we certainly can see them metaphorically if we think of refugees at the border, or people who can't get health care, or those caught in depression or despair. There are more than enough valleys filled with dry bones.

And so, what do we do about it? Perhaps first we re-read that final line from Paul, "If the spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you." We're alive and we will continue to live even beyond this mortal life. And that knowledge gives us the confidence to live freely and fully here and now.

Peter Gomes tells the story of helping out one Christmas at Boston's Trinity church. He said there were hundreds of people there. They all seemed to know the Christmas carols, but most of them had no clue about the liturgy. He tells about one young man who, after he had taken the wine, said to Gomes, "Now what do I do?" And Gomes said to his eternal regret, he missed the moment and simply said, "Go back and sit down so someone else can come to the rail." What I'm guessing he wishes he had said, was something like "reflect on the fact that Christ Jesus lives within you, so go out into the world and live in a way that witnesses to that truth. Go and be a prophet in your turn, acknowledging a loving God who brings life out of death.

This is an unprecedented time. We are all missing being together as church, but perhaps the gift here is that we can expand what it means to be church: the church is the body of Christ in the world today, God's hands and feet. Church is those who feed the hungry and bind up the broken-hearted. Church is those who understand that this life is only the beginning and not the end. Church is those who can share that truth with others, most often in small ways: listening to a friend, walking with someone through suffering, giving the gift of attention to someone who is lonely, speaking a word of reassurance or kindness, offering to get groceries or medicine for someone who

can't get out. That's church: knowing and living out of the truth that God so loved the world that he continually brings new life out of death and that, for each of us, we can trust that we are now, and will be forever, in God's loving arms.