

The Rev. Kristin P. R. Wickersham, Rector  
The Valley of Dry Bones  
A Sermon for St. Peter's Parish Church  
Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A  
Sunday, March 29, 2020

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

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 he 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.

### **Psalm 130**

#### *De profundis*

- 1 Out of the depths have I called to you, O LORD;  
LORD, hear my voice; \*  
let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.
- 2 If you, LORD, were to note what is done amiss, \*  
O Lord, who could stand?
- 3 For there is forgiveness with you; \*  
therefore you shall be feared.
- 4 I wait for the LORD; my soul waits for him; \*  
in his word is my hope.
- 5 My soul waits for the LORD,  
more than watchmen for the morning, \*  
more than watchmen for the morning.
- 6 O Israel, wait for the LORD, \*  
for with the LORD there is mercy;
- 7 With him there is plenteous redemption, \*  
and he shall redeem Israel from all their sins.

**John 11:1-45**

Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.

Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." Jesus said to her, "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. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."

When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you." And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him. Now Jesus had not yet come to the village, but was still at the place where Martha had met him. The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there. When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he 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."

Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

-----

(In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.)

Our readings today (from Ezekiel, Psalms, and the one from John) resonate with each other in important and special ways. We begin with Ezekiel. Ezekiel was conveying his prophetic vision to the Hebrew people at an absolutely terrible time in their lives: their exile. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar had conquered the Kingdom of Judah and deported all the prominent leaders, craftsmen, smiths, priests, and other “people of valor” to Babylon. The people were exiled from their homeland and their temple. They lived as captives in a foreign land. Jerusalem was destroyed. The lives of the people weren't just disrupted, they were gone. Absolutely nothing was as it had been before. We can hear the actual voice of the people in today's reading. God recounts it to Ezekiel. God has heard the voice of God's people. They say, “Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.” Ezekiel's vision is about these bones, dry and scattered, filling a valley. Those same bones the people saw as themselves. God orders Ezekiel to prophecy to the people, and then God gives Ezekiel a vision. It begins with a rumbling and a rattling, rather like an earthquake. In that moment, Ezekiel's vision becomes God's vision. He sees what God sees for the future. God gathers the separated bones back together, connects them with sinews, and puts flesh back on them again. Finally, God breathes God's spirit back into the bones, and they live. They stand on their feet, a vast multitude of witnesses to the power of God in the world.

The vision isn't a resurrection story like the one we get on Easter. It's the story of a whole people, separated from life as they knew it, who feared that they were also separated from God. They believed that they were living in graves, in a state of death. God promises them that they will be brought up out of that state of communal death, and God's spirit will be among and in them, despite the utter destruction of the Temple. Through Ezekiel, God tells God's people not to give up hope. God doesn't live in the Temple. God's Spirit is like the four winds and is everywhere among the people. It blows where it wishes. You do not know where it comes from or where it is going.<sup>1</sup> God encourages the people to live, not in a state of death, but waiting for the time when God will gather them together again and place them back on their own soil.

It's a story about death and life, and how people choose to live in difficult times. It's a story about a vision. It points out that often times people's vision is limited, limited by shock and grief at loss, sadness, isolation, and despair. Everything they knew and relied on had been taken away. They felt dry, separated and lifeless. They grieved, and in their grief, their vision became narrowed to what they could see immediately before them, in that moment.

Similarly Martha and Mary, Jesus' dear friends, were grieving. Their brother Lazarus had died. Even when Jesus says to Martha, “I am the resurrection and the life” and she confesses that she knows he is the Messiah her vision is limited to what she knows: death is final. She sees only the grief and trauma that is right in front of her in that moment. She knows Jesus is the Messiah but she can't conceive of everything that might mean. She can see where she is and how she got there. Lord, she says, If you had been here, my brother would not have died. She looks to the past and sees the series of events that led to this moment and she weeps.

It's important to engage with our grief when life changes unexpectedly. Normally when there is loss in a community it affects a portion of that community. Where we are now as a society is affecting all of us. In fact it's affecting the whole world. We can look back at how we got to this place and grieve the errors and things that we wish had happened instead. It's important also to see clearly where we are; to feel our loss.

If you're a child, you've lost school, being together with your friends every day, and personal engagements with your teachers. You've lost sports, dances, plays, and graduation ceremonies. Adults too have lost. Lost the physical closeness of gathering with friends. Lost a stable paycheck. Lost dinners out and going to the movies. We've lost gathering together for worship. We may begin to be feeling dry and separated. We may wonder about where God is in all this. Even if we confess our belief in God, we may wonder what God really can do in this dire situation. If you feel like that, it's okay. Grieving is a healthy and important part of experiencing and processing trauma and loss. It's alright to be sad. Being sad doesn't indicate a lack of faith.

Lament is a key part of Christian life that most of us forget during a life of relative stability and ease. Psalm 130 shows us an engagement with those feelings. The psalmist writes "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice. Let your ear be attentive to my supplications." Lament, grief, is an important path and a partner with hope. Engagement with Lament and what we see around us gives the Holy Spirit an opening to come into us and show us God's vision for the future. Lament and grief break us open. Not just our spirits, but also our hearts.

You may have seen some of this in the news lately, if you were able to see past the grim statistics and news of death and loss. Against the backdrop of the valley of dry bones perhaps you saw places where people gathered together and life was breathed into them again. In the UK, people have been asked to stay home and only go out once a day to get some exercise. Essential workers continue on the job: doctors, nurses, grocery store workers, delivery drivers, janitors. There was a beautiful news story about a young female ambulance driver. She was simply walking out of her house to the street to get into her car and go to work. As the weary woman walked the few feet down the front sidewalk, her neighbors from the houses all around came out and stood on their porches. As they watched her walk to her car, with her National Health Service uniform on, they all began to clap and applaud. In the midst of death she reminded them of life.

Also this week, the National Cathedral came upon a stockpile of NC 95 masks. They had stockpiled them after the bird flu scare of 2006 in case of future pandemic. The precious masks were stored in a crypt in the basement, and until this week were forgotten. Then a cathedral stonemason, Joe Alonso, remembered they were there. The cathedral immediately donated them to two hospitals in the DC area where health care workers were facing an extreme shortage.

Both these stories are accounts of life in the midst of death. As we go through the next weeks and months, it's alright to engage with the emotions we'll all be feeling. Lament with the psalmist. Identify with the Hebrews in Exile. Cry with Martha and Jesus. Allow the Holy Spirit to work with all those emotions. This is part of what it is to be fully human. Then remember that Jesus commands us to come out of our tombs and unbind ourselves from our grief. Hope in God.

Ultimately, we will be returned from exile. We will be gathered together again as a people. Our God is a God of life. Look around and see the power of God at work in the world. Even in death, loss, and grief, we are in life<sup>2</sup>. Breathe in the Holy Spirit. Breathe in the breath of life.

Amen.

---

<sup>1</sup> John 3:8

<sup>2</sup> A reference to the words of Martin Luther, who wrote, "We say, 'In the midst of life, we die.' God answers, 'Nay, in the midst of death, we live.'"