

Sermon Title "Hope Lies in the Source"

Kirk of St James

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The story we read in Ezekiel today sounds more like the start of a Shakespearean play or summer blockbuster, than anything else. One writer commenting on this passage included a poem based on it by a man named Dempsey R. Calhoun named *Bone*. He wrote "Bone lay scattered and artifactual, Wind-rowed like dead branches whose tree bodies repeat the desiccation, all hope bleached and lost, living moisture evaporated, Calcified memories of what was, or seeds of what could be, wandering shards of vessels that once thrummed with pure energy, where honor and dishonor wrestled. Stripped of living water to walk the hills needing only gravity to line the valley. It was never about the bones anyway rather a glimpse of pure power a reminder of who's in charge of restoration. Real hope lies in the source." The poem perfectly captures the emptiness and lifelessness of the bones. It imagines these people who once were living, breathing, and teeming with life. Not anymore though, now they appear to be done, and have no further to go.

Into the silence God speaks and, in his words lays new possibilities. In terms of imagery, few stories in the Bible offer richer material. When we read this account it is impossible not to picture what is going on. A man is standing looking out over a valley (maybe we picture a dry and dusty desert scene) that is full of bones and skulls lying haphazardly as far as the eye can see. He is picking his way carefully among them, and they are bleached white from the sun and the wind, and the elements. In many ways it seems a gruesome beginning. But then the story takes a turn. God speaks and man answers, and suddenly what seems impossible becomes possible--as the poem stated the real hope lies in the source. Why is this story in Ezekiel so important this Lenten season? What questions should we ask ourselves as we ponder it?

Thoughts around life after death in the ancient world were complicated. Some believed that life after death required a physical body. For resurrection to be possible a person needed both a body and soul. When Christians were being persecuted it was not uncommon for the persecutors to maim, burn, or otherwise scatter the body in order to rob them of the possibility of resurrection and keep the morale of surviving Christians low. For others like the Gnostics they wanted nothing more than for their soul to be released from their physical body and set free. Either way the idea of a body being raised from certain death was a major miracle. In the story of Lazarus today there is an additional key sentence that points to the depth of the miracle being performed.

While there were different understandings around death and resurrection in the Bible, another belief in the ancient world was that when a person died their soul did not depart immediately, instead it stayed near the body for three days and then departed. In John the author makes a point of stating that Lazarus has been in the tomb for four days. This emphasizes the fact that for the grieving family and friends there is no way Lazarus will ever come back. His soul has completely departed. The fact that Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead on the fourth day is incomprehensible. Much more so than it would have been during the first three days. Jesus has done what is impossible.

When Ezekiel is standing in the valley of dry bones, there should be no hope there for anything. But instead of saying so, he is very diplomatic. When God asks him “Can these bones live?” he replies “O Lord God, you know.” God knows. As one writer says “Ezekiel’s vision is given for a people who have lost heart, who are suffering a death of the spirit, a living death in exile in a foreign land. Their temple has been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either

killed or dragged off into a foreign land. Ezekiel witnesses the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones. Can these bones live? That is what God asks.” God can breathe life into anything. God is challenging Ezekiel to believe in him in a new way. This vision challenges us all through every generation to know that God gives life, restores life, and that death will never have the last word, even if outwardly all life has been taken away, and there is nothing left but a pile of bleached bones. God is the creator, the source, and the life.

There are two aspects to consider when we think of this passage during the Lenten season. The first is that as we journey toward the cross during this season of Lent, it is not a bad thing for us to consider those areas of our lives that feel like dry bones, and dry times. A phrase that has often been used to describe these moments is the “dark night of the soul.” Those times in our lives where anxiety, depression, uncertainty, fear, and questions plague us. We so often want to rush through the valley of bones and get to part where God breathes life into everything. But part of the Christian journey, if we are honest with ourselves and, with others is learning to live through these moments of barrenness. Moments where God feels far away, and we struggle. This season of Lent may we take some time to look at the areas in our lives that feel like the valley of dry bones.

The Chaplain and director of Educational Programs at Presbyterian College, Shuling Chen wrote a reflection on this and she wrote “My mother suffers from Alzheimer’s’ disease. Every day is a struggle for her as well as for my sister and me who take turns caring for her. It is extremely painful to see her deteriorate from an intelligent and articulate woman into a confused and fearful shadow of her former self. The frustration of always being asked and having to answer the same questions over and over is paired by my tremendous guilt of losing patience

with her at times. The ongoing grief for the loss of the mother I once knew is so great that I often break down and cry. Like Ezekiel, I feel as if I am standing in the middle of the desert, looking at lifeless scenery, feeling hopeless, lonely and scared. There is always a temptation to give up, to be overwhelmed by desperation, to indulge in the sense of despair, but when Ezekiel answered God's question of "Mortal, can these bones live?" with "Oh Lord God, you know", he demonstrated his faith and trust in God. He knows that despite what it may seem, God is at work. When we are confronted with struggles and suffering, God is there with us. When we are afraid to move forward, God breathes his spirit within us and gives us a renewed life and hope. Without the cross, there would be no resurrection. Without tribulations, it is hard to understand what hope really is. Sometimes we find ourselves in situations that appear hopeless, perhaps instead of questioning or arguing with God, let us put our trust in God and say, "God, you know". Let God be at work in our life, let his spirit restore us." Shuling identified the valley of bones in her life and named it. It is never easy to face and name those moments in our life, but like Ezekiel that is part of our Christian journey.

The other important aspect of this passage is knowing that God not only promises to bring things together, but also to breathe life into them. Martin Luther often struggled with what he called the dark night of the soul, and at one point in his life he just gave up and would not get out of bed. So finally one day when enough was enough, his wife marched into his room and said "Martin, is God dead?" To which he replied "No" and his wife answered "Then get out of bed and stop acting like he is." God breathes life. Even when situations appear to be past our control, or beyond possible, there is still a Lazarus moment. When the Israelites were scattered to the wind, and lost everything they held dear, their story was not done. Instead God collected them back together and breathed life into them. This is good news. In fact, it is the best of news.

So often in our lives we lament how much things change, the things we held dear no longer look the same. We hear it in our churches. We fear that the best has come and gone. We fear that we are nothing but dry bones in the valley. But God breathes new life into us.

We are quickly coming upon Holy Week and Easter Sunday. As one writer asks "Can the bones of a crucified man live? Yes. Just as we live in him, with him, through him, and for him." In the remaining weeks of Lent may we search out our own valleys of dry bones. To know them, name them, and claim them. May we also come to a deeper understanding of God through this process. So that as we stand on the edge of the valley and look out, and God asks us "Mortal, can these bones live?" we are able to answer with all of our heart "Yes Lord, definitely yes." From a valley of bones, to the raising of Lazarus, to a stone rolled away on Easter morning, we know God breathes life into us, and that through him the impossible, becomes possible.

