

A Lent 5 3.29.20

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

Focus Statement: God is with us.

A hundred years ago last month I wrote an article for the March Trumpet about the Old Testament reading for this morning. In the article I remarked I was reflecting on it there because we weren't reading the Old Testament readings during Lent and I didn't want to miss it. And then, well, all of the carefully made plans Laurie, David and I had for how our Lenten worship would happen went out the window, along with every other thing I thought I knew how to do. And I've found myself dwelling on this Ezekiel text a lot recently. So before we dig into the Gospel text, I want share this Ezekiel text with you and why it's been on my mind.

Ezekiel chapter thirty-four starts: "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."

"Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord." Whew, I love the prophets in general, but that is just some solid good news right there. So here's the backstory on what we just read. Ezekiel was a prophet for a people in exile. Jerusalem had fallen to Nebuchadnezzar and Ezekiel and the people of Israel were scattered across Babylon, alone and isolated, strangers in a foreign land.

And to these scared and scattered people, the Lord through Ezekiel gives this vision of hope and comfort. The Lord showed Ezekiel this valley full of bones. Just to make sure the point gets across, the scripture clarifies, "there were very many [bones] lying in the valley, and they were very dry." How this description must have resonated with Ezekiel's people, because they felt like scattered dry bones. Their community, their social safety net, their

very way of life had been taken from them. They couldn't see how the culture and community they'd once had could ever be rebuilt.

Of these dry bones, the Lord asked Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel answers with a question that I think is such a testament to his faith, "O Lord God, you know." I say that I think that is a testament to Ezekiel's faith because Ezekiel places the entire situation in God's hands. He doesn't plead for life or ask God to cast away death and make a new thing. He simply lays the world as it is in the hands of God. "O Lord God, you know" how this will turn out, let it turn out to your will.

"Prophesy to these bones," God told Ezekiel. Prophesy, remember, does not mean tell them their future, it means tell them the truth. Prophets aren't fortune tellers; they are truth speakers. They tell the truth, even when that truth is hard, about what is right and what is wrong. "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." So Ezekiel prophesied to them. He told them of God's promise to cause breath to enter them, to bring sinew and flesh back to them. And flesh and sinew reunited the bones, and breath entered them. But still they were just flesh and breath. Though they lived and stood, they still were just bones for they had no hope. So again the Lord said to Ezekiel, prophesy and say, 'I am going to open your graves... and bring you back to the land of Israel... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.'

Think about the order of that. First flesh, then breath, then finally spirit. What we see displayed here is that flesh and breath are not enough. It is the spirit that makes a

community, the relationship, the connection, the movement of God within us that brings us together. I think we're seeing truth of that in this time where churches have gone online for the time being, that it is the Spirit of God in our communities that make us church, not our building or even our people. Trinity has joked for a long time that the church has left the building, and now that we've really legit left it, we're finding new ways to find God's movement within us. Ways that will only enrich and enliven our life together once we are able to be together again. We live, people of God, because of the Spirit of God. Thanks be to God.

But we've still got Lazarus. And it's easy to rush ahead to the miracle of returned life at the end of the story, but I think the author is inviting us to dwell in the unclear middle. Most miracle stories in John have a very predictable pattern, first there's a miracle, then people talk about it for a while, then Jesus explains what it means. But the raising of Lazarus is different. For this story, the death of Lazarus is announced right at the very beginning, and then we wait with the disciples and Martha and Mary for forty long verses to see what Jesus is going to do. We hear this weird sentence where we learn that "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." We hear Martha and Mary's statements of faith tinged with regret, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." And we witness Jesus' own grief, weeping for Lazarus, or the sadness of his sisters, or the misunderstanding of those who gathered.

There's a lot of amazing good news in this Lazarus story. As I shared in the Wednesday bible study that has become the Wednesday bible lecture of Pastor Kjersten geeking out about the Gospel of John, this story is one of my favorites because there is just so much depth to it. But the things I take from it in this particular time and place are two. One, Jesus took on grief rather than rushing to a solution. I think that's what's demonstrated for us in the verse I read about how Jesus waited to go heal Lazarus. I think the point isn't that Jesus let Lazarus die so he could do this cool miracle, I think the point is Jesus was willing to put his own emotional needs aside for another. Jesus certainly could have rushed in and saved the day, and saved himself the sadness, but he didn't. I don't know why he didn't, I just know that he didn't. So in this time when I feel so helpless, like I just want to rush in and do something, this text invites me to ask the question, who am I trying to help? Am I trying to help another, or am I trying to help myself? Sometimes, not just in pandemics, but in other parts of life, when we rush in to be the savior in someone else's problems, we miss the fact that they might not need saving and the only person we're helping is ourselves, by making ourselves feel good about how helpful we are. I think this text models for us a Jesus who moves for others, who acts for others, not for himself.

And second, and most poignantly in this time of waiting, this text reminds us that it is ok to sit in the feels. To follow the lead of Martha and Mary and wonder why God is not acting, even as we trust that God will act. This text reminds us that healing takes time, that new life takes time. This text tells us that Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, and that Jesus revived Lazarus even though Martha and Mary never asked, and never

understood. To the end, standing at the tomb, Martha was still like, in the poetic words of the King James Version, “Lord, he stinketh,” and still Jesus acted.

And the final, and most important, good news for us in this text is about where it’s located and where it points us. If we read on from verse forty-five, we’d see that the raising of Lazarus was the final straw that led to the death of Jesus. It was seeing Lazarus raised from the dead that convinced the authorities that Jesus had to die. This text is layered with images that point us in that direction. And while Lazarus was raised, we know that Jesus will be resurrected. Resurrection is different from raising, because resurrection promises not a return to the old way of being, but the creation of a whole new thing.

So friends, here’s the good news: As we wait, and we walk, and we wonder, the Spirit of God is among us. We can’t see it, we maybe can’t feel it, but God is here. Thanks be to God.

Amen.