

Hope in Unexpected Places

Ezekiel 37:1-14

March 26, 2023 – Lent 5 – Parkminster United Church

I cannot hear today's Scripture reading without thinking of the spiritual song, *Dem Bones*. Many of us learned more about human anatomy than theology as we sang "the thigh bone is connected to the hip bone and the hip bone is connected to the backbone—now hear the word of God!" The song was written by the great songwriter, composer and American Civil Rights Activist James Weldon Johnson.

The last verse is the one that gets us in a particular way—"dem bones dem bones are gonna rise again" and this morning, the 5th Sunday in Lent, is the time we get to anticipate the sense of rising all over again in the Christian calendar.

The story of the prophet Ezekiel and the valley of the dry bones is a significant one for people of faith. Centuries ago, when the Israelites were dragged into exile, they weren't sent to refugee camps or interned in settlements. They were given all the comforts of home—they could marry, build houses, plant crops and buy and sell their goods. They were also given the illusion of being politically free—they could gather for public meetings, elect their own representatives and freely worship their own God. On the surface, everything looked good and many folks prospered, but they found it very difficult to worship in Babylon—they were heartsick over the destruction of their holy city and their holy temple.

Because of the catastrophe of the Babylonian takeover of Israel, the people nearly lost their identity. They nearly forgot who and whose they were. They had lost their homes, their families, their history, their place of worship. They almost forgot their own narrative - but not quite. Prophets like Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos, and others – would not let them forget - would not let them forget the promises God made to their ancestors so long ago – would not let them forget the promises God made over and over to them throughout their history.

They wanted to give up. They wanted to say they just couldn't do it anymore. They wanted to turn their backs and pretend the world was different. They wanted the good old days – which upon closer examination, were never really all that good.

These past few years, we too have stood at the precipice of that valley of dry bones. We have wondered if these bones could ever live again. We have wondered if we could go on – if we could continue in the face of so much devastation – so much isolation – so much sadness and despair – so much of "unprecedented times" – so much death – so much strife – so much polarization.

In today's reading from the prophet Ezekiel, you may have noticed how often the words 'spirit' and 'wind' and 'breath' are used. Nine times. And while these words are translated differently in English, it is the same word every time in Hebrew - *ruach*. Ruach – the breath of God. Ruach – the life-giving breath of God. Whether it is translated as wind, spirit, or breath, it is the same life-giving force. All from God. Breathing becomes a metaphor for divine presence.

Despite the fear of being cut off from God – of having lost God – God reassured God's people – that God is always as near as their own breathing. With God's spirit anything is possible.

So as today's reading tell us, the Spirit of God carries the prophet Ezekiel out to a valley. It was filled with dry bones. Then the Spirit of God asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" "Only you know that" was Ezekiel's reply. But then God asked him to start preaching to those old piled up dry bones. "Dry bones! Hear the word of YHWH! I am going to breathe life into you...and you will know that I am God."

This is a tricky story. It is not a literal one. We know that dry bones are just that, dry bones. They are not going to get up and do a dance. If I was Ezekiel and had to talk you all into believing this was going to happen, I might pull God aside for a little chat.

Do you happen to remember the 1987 film *The Princess Bride*? If you have never seen it, I recommend watching it. This film by Rob Reiner makes me think of this dry bones' moment. On a quest to win the Princess and secure a nation, Westley, the hero, has been sadly tortured in the Pit of Despair. He appears to be quite gone, dead, really, but his two friends carry him to the house of Miracle Max hoping for a magic potion that will revive him. Miracle Max takes one look at Westley and says—hopefully—, "he is only mostly dead."

I looked at Miracle Max this time as something of well, a miracle worker. Miracle Max had a sense of hope rather than hopelessness about bringing the only mostly dead back to life. It is like God talking out there in the valley of bones to Ezekiel: these dry bones can live! God always makes room for hope—even in the most difficult and impossible of difficult moments. Hope is what brings us to life.

Much of our living is based on a sense of what is happening today—Now. If we think we are doing well enough in the moment, then hope is not something we need to make a big investment in, in order to live. If we are coping only with what is—and what life is like now—then taking up residency in Babylon is really tempting. But God has a vision for us—Ezekiel is dragged out there into the Valley of Dry Bones and told to make them dance. That is the ultimate image of hope, plain, simple, and utterly revolutionary.

So, Ezekiel begins to preach. Breath enters him and proclaims new life to the dry bones. And the toe bones get connected to the feet bones and the feet bones to the leg bones and well—you know the rest. They begin to rattle and shake and the whole valley began to dance with breathing, hoping, wondering, living people!

Ezekiel 37 is a resurrection story. It is a story of hope in the face of despair – of new life in the valley of dry bones. It is a transformation story. So very fitting for the times we are in as individuals and a community of faith.

Why do we live into our commitment to anti-racism, right relations, and climate justice? Why do we support refugee families and organizations such as The Healing of the Seven Generations, A Better Tent City, Waterloo Wayside, and House of Friendship? Why do we continue to sing hymns and celebrate with each other in worship? Why do we pray for those who suffer and grieve the deaths of our longtime beloveds? Why do we open ourselves to each other and try to work together to create a loving—justice community where everyone is invited to be “at home”—loved, respected, and included?

Because we know that God is not done with any of us yet and wants us to live, dance and claim the gift of hope in our lives, in communities and for the world. This morning, we stand next to Miracle Max and Ezekiel to proclaim hope. God says, “I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.”

A resurrection story is not simply a story of God doing the God thing - life where there was death. A resurrection story is about God working the way God works through all of creation to bring about new life and hope and promise for a new future. And often it’s a story about the divine working through us bringing into reality new life and new hope and new possibility.

A resurrection story reminds us that there is always something bigger going on than even we can know. Every time we lose something we think we cannot possibly live without; we find new and creative ways to move forward. The pandemic taught us some of those things. First there was social distancing. Then there was isolation – stay home – stay safe. There was no gathering together in-person to be the church. We went on-line. We went virtual. We made changes – so many changes. We worked from home. We worshipped from home. We thought our lives had closed.

And yet – here we are. Our own resurrection story. Being able this past year to finally gather in this special place – remembering how special this church space is. How special it is to worship

together in-person and online in this sanctuary – this place filled with the Spirit! The tangible – wind – Spirit - breath of God in and through and around us – in this place. Beyond this place.

Yes – these bones can live and thrive. In the words of a children’s church song from my childhood: ‘The church is not a building – the church is not a steeple – the church is not a resting place – the church is a people.’ And this people can live and thrive and breathe in the Spirit of God. Resurrection is possible. It is so!

Arise Parkminster! Discover that you can dance and hope and dream and live. God is not done with us, and God is not done, even in the most difficult parts of the world.

Arise! Dance! Hope! And live. May it be so. Amen.

Rev. Heather Power