

Fifth Sunday in Lent, The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony - March 29, 2020

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

The scriptures appointed for this fifth Sunday of Lent are for me poignant in so many ways as I am sure that they are for you. The theme clearly is death and resurrection. In some sense these readings foreshadow what is to come, the crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus. But we would make a mistake to quickly pass over these readings. They are not only a glimpse of the promise of what might be in our own time, they are a picture of what is here and now and they serve as an illumination of our journey in the next many days.

Ezekiel is a prophet of the Jewish exile in Babylon. As such a prophet, he brings attention to the situation in which the people of Israel find themselves. And he shines a bright light on the power of God to breathe new life into dry bones. Dry bones are caused to become whole again, with sinew, muscle, flesh and blood. God not only promises, God acts and life is restored, perhaps not exactly as it was before, but with new meaning. At the core of the biblical story is the story of displacement, the story of how a people and how individual people wander far from home and long to return. Sometimes the experience of wandering is a choice as with Abraham and sometimes wandering is due to events entirely beyond our control. Whether by choice or by events beyond control, the experience of wandering is often also an experience of exile, either physically or spiritually. When we wander, whether we know it or not, we are in search of something beyond ourselves.

The Israelites experienced this sense of wandering and exile many times in their history. The very first exile was of Adam and Eve who were sent out of the Garden of Eden fated to be permanently banished. Exile was again the fate of the children of God when they became slaves in Egypt and leaving Egypt, wandered as they did, for 40 years before coming into the Promised Land. Exile and wandering were their lot once again when the more powerful nations of the Middle East eventually conquered both the northern and southern kingdoms. And always God acted in God's time to restore God's children to the land and to relationship with the Creator.

Ezekiel, living in exile, in a foreign land, receives a vision of what God is planning for the people.

"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;" The hand of the Lord, a vivid metaphor for God's power that God will bring to bear in the situation of exile, displacement and longing for home.

It is the spirit of the Lord, the Holy Spirit, that acts to bring to bear those things which are necessary for restoration. The power of God coupled with the faith and trust of the prophet is the raw material for resurrection and restoration.

The vision begins in a valley filled with dry and brittle bones, bones bleached and clearly without life. It is necessarily so, in order to be the sign of God's power and God's will to act.

I imagine that this vision took the prophet by surprise. He quite possibly was simply living his life and not expecting change in the near term. And suddenly the spirit of God lifts him out of his routine and into a vision that is about possibility and opportunity, a vision that if it is to be realized requires him to act with God. The demand of God to the prophet is that he prophesy to the bones. The command of

God is that the prophet be obedient and that the prophet be the vehicle through which the breath of God comes upon the dry and brittle bones and brings them to life and to restoration. "I prophesied as he {God} commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude." It was and is through the cooperation of the prophet that the spirit of God came into the situation. It is through the cooperation, the obedience of the prophet that promise is turned into restoration. It is in the submission of the prophet that the longing for home is turned into return.

All of this speaks to me powerfully of our current situation with the COVID-19 virus. I speak for many when I say that I am experiencing a form of exile that I have never encountered before. It helps to name it as such. Giving the feeling a name means that it is real. The reality of this feeling is honored by God when we bring it to prayer. It is in prayer, in simply sitting with God for a time whether with words or silence that our exile from what we have known and loved is made holy. In an unexpected way this time of exile can be a gift if we receive it as such. Not something that is forever but a time of learning and preparation for the restoration that we know is to come.

While my movement is restricted, I still have this feeling of wandering in unfamiliar territory. In many ways, for many of us, it has seemed as if we are living in the valley of the dry bones. We are unable to worship together, to be in the sacred space that means community for us. We are seeking answers where there are very few answers to be had. We long for God in a new and very different way than we have ever experienced before. Many years ago I saw a bumper sticker which stays with me. It read; "Feeling far from God? Who moved?" God has not moved. Much has changed and yet at the core, much is still the same. We are being reminded of things we always knew but sometimes have submerged in the business of life. The gift of this time can be the realization that we are called back to the basics of our faith.

In the beginning, as described in the book of Genesis, there was the wind, in Hebrew the ruach, the breath of God, in English, the Holy Spirit. It is with this wind, this breath this Holy Spirit that God created all that is. The Holy Spirit has never gone from the earth. The Holy Spirit continues to create, resurrect, and restore in the world. The promise of God is that through the power of the Holy Spirit, the dry bones of this moment and time will be restored in recognizable ways. We will be brought home with hope and promise that there will be a new heaven and a new earth out of this time of exile. If we like Ezekiel are true to the words of prophesy that God is showing us, we will have changed and such change will move us to a new and better place with God. The breath of God in resurrection and restoration is making all things new and we will be the better for it. This is a time to reflect on the community of St. Augustine and our individual parts in that community. Where have we erred, where have we hurt, where might we have taken a different path? Where have we honored God's call, where have we created with God and with one another something good and valuable? Where have we loved our neighbor as our self? Where have we not?

Staying home for a period is an unexpected gift of time. We can treat this as a burden and an affliction or we can take the time to slow our life, reflect on what has been, what is now and what we would like to future to hold. With God's help, when we come back together in a physical space we can celebrate what we have together. We can be open to the plan that God has for us moving into the future. And with Ezekiel we will be prophets of that future and we will see the dry bones become alive again.