



Sermon

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

The Fifth Sunday in Lent

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Historic St. George's UMC

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God is not Done: Come and See

The hand of the Lord came upon me...and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones...and they were very dry. [The Lord] said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" ...Prophesy to these bones and say to them...I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." Ezekiel 37:1-5

Have you ever been to Babylon?

I don't mean the Babylon out on Long Island or one of the Podunk places dotting the American landscape where there is a fondness for naming burghs after something in the Bible. I don't exactly mean the biblical Babylon either, that jewel city of the Assyrian empire, home base of King Nebuchadnezzar whose hanging gardens were one of the seven wonders to the ancient world and whose nasty treatment of Hebrew captives and exiles may be even more historic to God's people. How could we ever have been there? That was so long ago.

Have you ever been to Babylon?

The Babylon I'm talking about is the Babylon of biblical imagery. Babylon is the place of *DIS*placement. Babylon is the place where you are that is NOT the place you want to be. Babylon is the place of separation. Babylon is the place where you yearn for home with no hope of ever getting there. Babylon is being stuck in a rut.

Have you ever been to Babylon?

The back story to this powerful metaphor from sacred text is about a time when Jerusalem fell into the hands of an oppressive foe, the Temple was destroyed and all the able-bodied, brightest and best young Hebrews were banished. The place of their exile was Babylon. (By the way, the ruins of Babylon can be found in present day Iraq, about 55 miles south of Baghdad. Draw your own conclusions from that bit of information.)

Historians tell us these promising young, deported Hebrews were not kept in prisons or even camps imagined from seeing movies like *Schindler's List*. The Hebrews were free to marry, build homes, plant crops, exchange good and services. Some people did quite well, got wealthy even. In Babylon they were free to assemble, elect leaders and practice their religion. But these Hebrews did have a difficult time with one thing. They had a tough time worshipping in exile because they never got over the destruction of their holy city and temple in Zion.

They were not where they wanted to be. They were not where they knew deep-down they were supposed to be. So they lived their lives. But there was a sadness that ran to their bones. And the famous words from the Psalms, the ones that say:

By the waters of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our harps and our tormentors asked for mirth saying, 'Sing one of the (happy) songs of Zion!' How can we sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land? – Psalm 137:1-4 comes from this context. The Hebrews were making it, but they had a hard time singing the Lord's song in captivity.

My experience in pastoral ministry is that often when someone's life is interrupted by a great tragedy, they stop coming to worship. They stop singing the Lord's song. I used to think these good people didn't want to be around people, didn't want to have to talk to people, or were embarrassed by their loss of job, change in health or the death of a loved one. But wonder if there's not something else stirring in their bones. The reason people stop worshipping is they have lost their vision of God. To stand in worship beside so many whose lives seem to be going well enough just now, to stand beside people singing praise to the Lord creates an

uncomfortable contradiction. My experience in pastoral ministry is that there is this tragic irony of the soul that in the times we most need to worship, we find it the most difficult.

We are like the exiles in Babylon. We try to numb deep down aches by making life more comfortable. We keep ourselves busy. We work hard. We collect a lot of things. We buy houses. We renovate if we've been in the same home for a while. We move the furniture. We deepen our roots. We try to make Babylon as nice as we possibly can. We try to make Babylon bearable. We deaden our longing for God. We begin to spiritually die. And so does the rest of us from inside out.

Eventually things get cozy. We find a new comfort zone, just like the Hebrew exiles in Babylon. Historians tell us that even after their time of exile was over and the forces of political power changed, even after the Hebrews were encouraged to go back to Jerusalem, most of them did not want to go back. Their old dreams of living in the Lord's presence had died, buried by just getting-by, shrouded by coping devices.

But one day, the Spirit of the Lord grabbed hold of his old prophet Ezekiel and took him to a valley of dry bones. It looked like a scorched battlefield. Sun bleached bones strewn all over the place. The Lord asked Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Looking around at all those skeletons, Ezekiel thought hard and said: "My Lord, only you know the answer." Then, the Lord told Ezekiel to start preaching to the bones. The Lord even gave Ezekiel the message: "Dry bones, listen to the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones, I will bring the breath of life to you and you will come alive. You shall know that I am the Lord."

How he must have felt. The Lord's prophet standing amidst a pile of dry, decaying, dead bones telling them, of all things, not to give up hope. If I were Ezekiel, I would have tried to bargain with God, suggesting the Lord bring these bones back to life, get them up and dancing AND THEN I'll do a little preaching. Then, I'll sound like a prophet. Then, I'll testify. "See," I'd say. "Isn't God great? Look at what God can do."

But that is not the way of the God who calls us to believe without seeing. That is

because "the word of the Lord" is a word that is always making room for hope. And it is the hope that brings us back to life. Hope rises from our bones and chooses to believe in spite of how it seems or how it is.

One of the most oft spoken phrases of our time says: "It is what it is." The phrase speaks resignation. The phrase speaks passive acceptance. The phrase speaks existential acquiescence. The phrase absolutizes the present. "It is what it is." The phrase speaks stuck-ness with things as they appear in this moment.

Old Testament scholar and Bible commentator Walter Brueggemann says this is not how hope works: Hope says the way things are is precarious. Hope says the way things are is anything but settled unless we settle. Hope calls to us from our bones: do not to absolutize the present. Hope says don't bank on today because it will not last.

Brueggemann would say Amen! to the title of Barak Obama's book: The Audacity of Hope. (This is not a political endorsement, but another "Amen! about such as assessment of hope.) Hope is a bold, daring, brave, even subversive. This is why hope is such a revolutionary thing. It is why the poor are so good at hoping and the rest of us middle and upper class folk getting-by in Babylon have such a difficult time hoping. We think we are doing well enough. Our only worry is that we not lose ground on tomorrow. But if we turn against tomorrow, we turn our back on hope. And then the human spirit begins to waste away.

In Reaching for Rainbows poet Ann Weems writes about hope's vision:

- I just keep reaching for rainbows, Thinking one God's morning...
- The hungry fed
- The dying held
- The maimed walking
- The angry stroked
- The violent calmed
- The oppressed freed
- The oppressors changed
- Every tear wiped away...
- But instead of [rainbow] colors in our storms
- Gray and black infiltrate, dirtying the sky.

- Just the same, I know the promise of the rainbow...

Ezekiel would say, "And I've seen the promise of the dry bones."

The people of God have always found life NOT in what we see today, in "gray or black infiltrating the sky" but in the promise of a God who breathes life at the bone yard – and we come to life – whose child Jesus calls "come out" and "unbind the wrappings" that stink of death. The day, stuck in our ruts and routines, we lose our vision of God is the day we deny believing in the resurrection.

Why do God's people like the ones who Elaine mentioned last week – church disaster relief workers – pour their little cup of water in places like the Sudan where for all intents and purposes, hope runs dry? Why did a dozen of us get up before dawn to cook breakfast at Grace Café when the problem of homelessness in Philadelphia gets worse instead of better? Why does the woman I know, whose son was the first Pennsylvania Guardsman killed in Iraq, keep leading a weekly peace demonstration on Broad Street? Why do we keep visiting shut-ins and those in hospitals when we have no miracle drug to take away their pain or promise them recovery? Why do we commit ourselves to a political process when there

is so much cynicism, fear-mongering, ugliness and despair in the whole darn thing. Why? Because God is not done.

So today we take our stand beside Ezekiel, today we face our Babylons – our displaced places, the where-we-are places we know deep down are not our meant-to-be places, our stuck-in-the-rut places, the yearning-for-home-with-no-hope-of-getting-there places. Today is the day we stand beside Ezekiel and prophesy to the dry bones: "Listen to what God says. "Watch this. I'm bringing the breath of life and you'll come alive." *You* who gave up hope, who gave up dreaming, who settled for a comfortable routine life of work, bills, and laundry. *You* who think your best years are behind you. *You* who think God has forgotten about your little life: *Arise*. It's a dress rehearsal Sunday for Easter. Unbind from the heap of discarded dreams. Dance with the Holy Spirit pulsating life back into your dry, bleached bones. Let go into resurrected hope.

The world is dying for us to believe God is not done.

Amen.

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