

March 29, 2020

Fifth Sunday in Lent

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St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Benicia

Sermon Preached via Facebook Live

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

Prophecy to the Bones and the Breath

Today is the last Sunday of our Lenten journey. The next time we gather here in this way, it will be Palm Sunday -- the beginning of holy week. There are practical things to consider, like how we will process and wave palms, or wash one another's feet, or kindle a new fire the night before Easter. These are all questions that can be answered, thought through, and troubleshooted. Yet at their root there is a spiritual question, not so easily answered. It's an ancient question that our ancestors called out into the wilderness: "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

This ancient question dates back to 586 or 587 BCE when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, and the people of the kingdom of Judah were exiled to Babylon. This was a critical moment in the history, psyche, and theology of the Hebrew people. God's presence lived in the temple. It wasn't just a beautiful building, but a dwelling place for the divine. Finally, after years of wind and sand and jostling about in an ark, the spirit of God had a home. The people had a home. Deep in their bones they felt the toil of their ancestors, the years of wind and sand and tents and manna. I imagine that the milk and honey of their promised land carried a particular sweetness because of that.

And all of that was ripped away from them in exile. We cannot know exactly what that was like, but Psalm 137 is a memory, a song trapped in amber that might give us a hint.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
2 On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
3 For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

It was in this time, in this place that the prophet Ezekiel lived. His oracles warned the people before the temple’s destruction and continued throughout the exile. He and his family were among the priestly class torn away from Judah to live in a foreign country. This vision of the valley of the dry bones is perhaps his most famous, inspiring African-American spirituals and art. A verse is carved in stone at Yad Vashem, Israel’s official monument to holocaust survivors. People in countless cultures, times, and places have felt deep resonance and found hope in those dry bones.

Our lectionary has led us through some interesting valleys lately. Last week it was the valley of the shadow of death. This week it’s a valley of dry bones. Valleys are supposed to be green and lush places, where the landscape gathers in gentle waters in brooks and rivers, where wildflowers bloom with reckless abandon and vineyards thrive.

Yet God shows Ezekiel a valley of dry bones. Something terrible has happened there. A battle, or perhaps it’s a mass grave where the undertakers didn’t have time to properly bury the bodies. And the valley is old, and it’s dry - literally and figuratively un-natural. It is beyond saving. And the bones? They are too. Forgotten, left behind in heaps because someone, for some reason, was in a rush.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel knows a leading question when he hears one. He doesn’t say “Yes, yes!” to please the school master or “No!” in his

despair. His answer is simply faithful. "O Lord God, you know." And God commands him: "Prophecy to these bones."

Prophecy? To the dust? How could Ezekiel speak life into this valley of environmental devastation and the worst of human behavior? How could he sing the Lord's song in this strange land?

This is the question on my heart -- and perhaps on yours -- as we approach holy week as an exiled community. How can we sing the Lord's song -- all the verses, from triumphal entry to crucifixion to resurrection -- in a strange land? In a new setting that feels fundamentally un-natural to us?

"Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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."

Our worship during holy week is going to call us to strange lands. It is going to require each of us, in our own homes, to prophecy to the bones and the breath. To sing in front of our spouses and children, to wash their feet, to light candles and pray at the kitchen table, maybe even to parade around our living rooms waving branches from the backyard. Comfort zones, be darned!

But I suspect that we will learn, as Ezekiel and the other exiles learned, that God does not dwell in a church or a temple. Maybe, we'll learn that God doesn't dwell anywhere, really. But instead that God moves, God breathes in us, and upon the slain that all may live. That God breathed within his son Jesus, even as he heaved and sobbed at the death of Lazarus.

This holy week use that sacred breath. Speak life into the driest, most desolate places that are nothing but ashes and dust and dry bones. Speak life into your home and your family. Prophecy to the bones and the breath, mortal, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Thus says the Lord.

Amen.