

Sunday, March 29, 2020
Fifth Sunday in Lent (Year A)
Ezekiel 37.1-14; John 11.1-45
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher
Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/145503320192807/>
(Sermon begins at about 17:30)

“Coming Through Our Own Valley of Dry Bones”

I’ve said it before, and I’ll probably say it again—probably many more times in my career—but it never ceases to amaze me how the designated readings in our Sunday Lectionary so often fit so well with what we are dealing with personally, as a parish, or as a nation. Or in this case, as a world.

In this COVID-19 pandemic, we find ourselves in a valley of dry bones, of sorts. A place of increasing death, both literal and metaphorical. And we find ourselves, along with Mary and Martha, grieving the losses experienced through this health crisis. Not just the mounting deaths, but also the loss of our former way of life as we are forced to find a new way of being while “sheltered in place.” Both these stories offer lessons for us as we move through our current circumstances. They offer us glimpses of what may await us on the other side.

Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones is both literal and metaphorical. The Babylonian invasion has taken its toll on Israel. The ravages of years of war and exile have destroyed the nation. Many people have died. Israel’s cities, and along with them, their culture and society, have been decimated. The bones represent the death and destruction—all that has been lost. But there is also an underlying symbolism in the dry bones. One that is metaphorical, but equally relevant. Not only has Israel been literally laid to waste. Her people have also wasted away spiritually. Centuries of sin and idolatry have driven them farther and farther from their God. It has left the people that remain with lifeless spirits. With lifeless, hardened hearts.

In his vision, Ezekiel sees the beginning of the resuscitation of Israel. “The bones came together, bone to its bone . . . and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them” (Ez 37.7-8). The bones may have been reassembled into bodies, “but there was no breath in them.” There was no life in them. They were shells of their former selves.

The use of the word “breath” in this vision is no accident. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruach*. This same word also translates as “spirit.” Breath. Spirit. Intimately connected. Just as in the second creation story in Genesis: “the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2.7). God’s breath giving physical life, but also imbuing humanity with God’s Spirit. In the valley of dry bones, the reassembled bones that were Israel not only lacked physical life at this point, they also lacked any connection with God, due to the absence of God’s Spirit.

God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. Ezekiel does just that, and in response, the wind—yet another translation of *ruach*—enlivens the reassembled bones. God promises to

bring the people back to the land of Israel. But returning to their land will not be enough to make Israel God's people again. Something more is needed. God then says to Israel, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall [truly] live" (Ez 37.14). Only then will he place them on their own soil, returning them to where they once lived and to what they once had: a life energized by the Spirit of God.

God's question to Ezekiel upon bringing him to the valley dry bones was "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ez 37.3). This is not about the afterlife or resurrection, but about whether it is possible to return to the world of the living. To return to what they had been. Not to what and who Israel had been before the exile, but rather, to what and who God created them and intended them to be. This vision is a sign of hope and promise that God will use the circumstances of the Babylonian invasion and ensuing exile as a catalyst to create new life in dead Israel.

The image of the valley of dry bones is equally poignant for us and for our world in our present day. Both literally and metaphorically. Literally, in that in some places, such as Italy, bodies of the dead stack up, waiting to be buried. A reality that we may face sooner rather than later as the coronavirus spreads exponentially in our own country. Metaphorically, in that our former way of being has been radically altered, resulting in a bare bones existence as we seek to shelter in place. Many of the structures of our society have been decimated, at least temporarily.

But this image as applied to our current circumstance is not about what has already happened, or what is happening, but about what will happen. Ezekiel's vision is not about dwelling on the past, or bemoaning the present, but about looking to the future. It is about the promise of a new future for Israel. And so it is for us. This is a vision of hope. Of what can happen. Of how, once the current crisis is past, we may be restored to fullness of life. That during this time of crisis, we might take the opportunity to reconnect with the Spirit of God that already dwells within us, that already energizes us, that already guides us. The Spirit that, even though still there, we might have lost touch with over time.

That means that the real hope is that the life we are restored to is not just the status quo that we experienced before COVID-19. Just as God promises that he will return Israel to a new and improved life, reanimated with his Spirit, so too do we have the same hope. That having come through this crisis, we too will be reanimated with God's Spirit. That through the events we are living even now, we will find ways to reconnect with God. That God may imbue us with a renewed Spirit. Allowing us to become the people he created and calls us to be. Those who live out of that Spirit that is, even now, being breathed into us anew.

Our Gospel reading about the raising of Lazarus offers another perspective from which to examine our present situation. Another perspective on how life can be after this is all over. The story of the raising of Lazarus deals with two critical themes. Grief and hope. First the grief. That's pretty obvious. Mary and Martha are experiencing profound grief at the loss of their brother. That's certainly understandable. But there is something else going on, as well. For Mary and Martha, this grief likely extends beyond the profound loss of a beloved sibling. For in their context, Lazarus would have been even more important than a loving and beloved

brother. The story does not mention any other relatives. No father, no husbands, no sons. It is highly likely that Lazarus served as the family patriarch, being the holder of the family's property. It would have been his responsibility, lacking father or husbands, to care for his sisters. With him gone, the future of Mary and Martha is uncertain. They face the possibility of becoming destitute, with no one to take care of them. As such, they could lose social standing, possibly even their community. Their loss has multiple levels to it. As does their grief.

When Jesus does finally arrive in Bethany, he is first greeted by Martha. She seems a bit upset, even resentful. "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (Jn 11.21). As Jesus tries to comfort and reassure her with promises of the resurrection, Martha does not seem to have much hope. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (Jn 11.24). On the last day. At some undetermined point in the future. The implied tone in her voice speaks volumes. "But what about now? What do we do in the meantime?"

When Jesus does get to the tomb where Lazarus has been buried, he is overwhelmed with sorrow. We are told that he wept. He is deeply moved. This simple display of emotions carries profound weight. Not just for Mary and Martha, but for all of us. It demonstrates that Jesus grieves as we do. Jesus empathizes with our suffering, with our loss. This means that not just Jesus, but God himself also grieves with us. God himself experiences our suffering and loss as his own.

Jesus then takes action to erase the grief, the suffering, and the loss. Going to the tomb "he cried out in a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out!'" (Jn 11.43). And he obeys. Lazarus is raised from the dead! In so doing, Jesus has erased the suffering and loss. He has restored the brother to his sisters. Their life will return to what it had been prior to this terrible four days.

When Jesus hears of Lazarus' death and delays in going to see him, John tells us that Jesus is using this situation as a teaching moment for his disciples. He knows how the story will end. He knows what he will do. But the disciples don't. He tells his disciples, "For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe" (Jn 11.15). In the subsequent raising of Lazarus, Jesus sends a profound message. Not just that the raising of Lazarus is a foretaste of what will ultimately happen to Jesus on Easter. As Jesus says to Martha before raising Lazarus, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (Jn 11.25-26). No, Jesus' message is that resurrection is not just something that will happen to him but is something that happens for everyone. But even more so, that resurrection is not just something that happens at "the last day," as Martha expressed. Resurrection is something that happens even now. This is the hope. This is the promise.

The story of the death and the subsequent raising of Lazarus is equally relevant to our present circumstances. That in the midst of this pandemic, we are experiencing loss and grief. Not just the deaths that have and will continue to occur. But also, the other losses that Mary and Martha experienced. The loss of economic stability. The loss of a way of life. The loss of community and support. Even though these losses are only temporary, they are losses, nonetheless. And they take their toll. The grief and anguish, even though temporary, are no less

real. But Jesus' promise to us is that at the end of death and loss, there is resurrection. That at the end of this, there will be new life.

Right now, we are in a desolate valley strewn with the still-drying bones of our pre coronavirus lives. We are standing at a tomb that contains what we have lost and had to seal way in recent days. But as these days of Lent wane and give way to the promise of the coming of Easter, we can and we must hold onto the hope and the promise, that when this too passes, God will breathe new life into us and make us more fully alive than we were when this all began.