

First Congregational United Church of Christ
Fifth Sunday in Lent- March 26, 2023

Scripture lesson: Ezekiel 37:1-14

AT THE END OF OURSELVES

I don't think that here's any way around it. Even for an Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel is one strange dude. Dreams, visions, ecstasies, altered states- name any frame of mind that's out of the ordinary and chances are high that he's in it. But like many unusual characters down through the ages, Ezekiel's on to a lot of truth that the rest of us often miss, ignore, or deny.

He lives in the worst of times for his Jewish people. He's in Jerusalem when the Babylonians first attack in 597 B.C. They carry him and half the population off into exile, but in Babylon Ezekiel continues to rave on. He prophesies hard words directed not so much against Babylon, but against his own people. He rails against them for being fickle and faithless.

But then worse news comes. The Babylonians have returned to Jerusalem to level it and turn it into a death pit. When Ezekiel learns about this, he has the vision that's reported in the lectionary Scripture lesson that Mary just read for us. Swept up in one of his mind-blowing trances, he sees a valley of dry bones. It's a scene of terrible devastation. From our era we can imagine it like the killing fields of Cambodia or the mass graves of Iraq.

It's all meant to reveal God's word to Israel, the word that God wants Ezekiel to deliver. The dry bones are a harsh symbol of Jerusalem laid waste- Jerusalem the golden become Jerusalem the ashen. Ezekiel looks out on a vast, grim wasteland and can't help but wonder, "Will there ever be life here again?"

The Lord asks *him*, "O mortal, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel answers, "Lord, only you know." In other words, "Lord, they can if you will it, but I don't know if you will."

The Lord replies: "Ezekiel, prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ' . . . hear the word of the Lord . . . Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.' Tell Israel that they *will* know new life in their land."

But we're not reading from Ezekiel 37 today just because it speaks of a dramatic turning point in Israel's distant past. We're reading from it now because the dry bones that Ezekiel saw are emblematic of our own worst times. The ancient devastation that they stand for points to the days when we are laid low.

Think of those times when we're completely dispirited, sapped of all energy and strength, and ready perhaps even to give up because it seems like there's just too much to overcome. Life's knot seems too tangled to untie. Too much goes on that seems so shallow and hollow. All around there's too much pain, injustice, and sham.

The day comes, for instance, when we receive a frightening diagnosis, or lose our job, or are betrayed by someone we've long trusted and counted on. We have a cherished, lifelong dream that gets shattered, or suffer the death of a close loved one much too soon, or collapse into

tears because the horror and ugliness of the daily headlines finally get to us. We wake up one day and feel for reasons that we can't even name that it's all just useless.

I suspect that all of us know the valley of dry bones from our own experience and Ezekiel's bizarre vision helps us to stay honest about that. God calls to us from it to let go of every scrap of false sunniness that we may cling to. Ezekiel's bleak imagery urges us to face head-on the dry bone valleys in all of our lives- yours, mine, and everyone's.

I'm afraid, though, that we often spend too much time and energy pretending that it's not so. How often do we put on a mask for public consumption to suggest that such times don't really afflict us? Others might feel put through the ringer by hard knocks, but not *me*.

So instead, I make sure that I'm always put together on the outside- looking sharp, smart, and in control. I can dress up on the inside, too, and push that to the surface as far as I can. I put on an emotional wardrobe of the pasted smile, the unruffled but slightly stiff demeanor, and the cool but strategic reticence all of which tries to say, "Hey, nothing ever gets to me. Other people might become shaky, but not *moi*."

This can spill over even to our relationship with God. We start feeling that we have to dress up for our Maker, as if this is something that God wants us to do. We put on a well-worn but spiffed up costume of unfailing strength and competence, thinking that somehow this does God a favor.

Christian writer Kathleen Norris speaks to this issue in her fine book, *The Cloister Walk*. She tells of how her parents regularly took her to church when she was young but of how she soon abandoned the faith that she thought she'd been taught there once she was out on her own. She later found a new form of it that brought her back to church in her thirties, but since then she's spent a lot of time thinking about her ins and outs and her ups and downs with God.

From her childhood, she remembers church mainly as "a formal affair, a matter of wearing 'Sunday best' and sitting up straight." She says that there was nothing necessarily wrong with that, but in looking back she sees a connection between it and a belief that she also absorbed at church which she now thinks is the biggest thing that went wrong in her Christian upbringing. It was the belief that you "had to be dressed up, both outwardly and inwardly, to meet God" . . . that (you had to be) a firm and even cheerful believer before (you) could dare show (your) face in His church."

Norris now calls that belief "insidious". It's insidious, she says, because it leads us to think that we're pleasing God when in fact we're only keeping a false distance between us and the One who wants us to draw close.

Nevertheless, dress up is still what we often do, especially in a culture like ours that highly values appearances. We dress up inside and out for God, for each other, and for ourselves. But what we really need to do, according to both Ezekiel and the season of Lent, is to bare our souls- bare them to ourselves, to God and often to each other.

Yes, Ezekiel's vision helps us to stay honest about our dry bone days. It keeps pressing on us too the question that God asks, "Can these dry bones live again, and, if so, how?" Reflecting on our own dry bone valleys, what kind of answer rings true?

Is it the answer of despair? Despair says, "Dry bones are dead bones and dead is the one thing that we can't do anything about. Dry bones cannot and will not live again." That's not God's answer to Ezekiel and as Christians it ultimately can't be ours, either, BUT . . . Lord knows we can be sorely tempted to it.

But there's a second answer that's probably more common. It says, "Life *can* come again to our dry bone valleys, IF- if we work at it. We need to maintain a positive attitude. We have to stay open to the possibilities of new life because otherwise staying dead just becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. With a heap of positive attitude, we can gain fresh energy to put what's left of our dry bones to work. We can imagine new vistas, develop plans, and work them through. With sheer determination and pluck, we can open new doors. We can ask for help from other people as well and in fact, we have to because only a proud fool thinks that a Lone Ranger can find the way to new life in a valley of dry bones."

I think that there's a great deal of truth in that second answer and it's one that I believe we need to firmly embrace. But before we can, we have to take yet another one straight to heart, too. We need the benefits of this third answer- one that's even more basic and truthful because without it, our dry bones *cannot* adopt a positive attitude or exercise imagination or work hard or enlist the help of others.

This third answer is necessary because it squarely faces up to the brutal truth that despair first insists on. Despair says, "Dry bones are dead bones and dead is the one thing that we can't do anything about." The third answer fully affirms that despair is absolutely right about that, but also that despair is completely wrong to say that this means that dead bones can't live again. We can't do anything about them, but *God* can.

Ezekiel sees dead bones come back to life NOT because of anything from within the bones themselves. On their own, they're dead and utterly incapable, but they come to life through the power of God. They live again not through more of the spirit of you and me, but only through the free and pure gift of the true and living God who *breathes* upon them.

We enter a dry bones valley and feel, "I don't think that I have it in me to get through this." We feel completely tapped out, yet still give ourselves a pep talk. "Wait a minute. You can do this. A shot of positive attitude, a jolt of imagination, your nose to the grindstone, and a little help from your friends- you can do it."

At the same time, though, deeper down- far deeper down- we know that we can't. We're forced to face the God's honest truth that sometimes there are gut-wrenching, heart-busting circumstances in which our own resources do *totally* run out and in which we have *nothing* left of ourselves with which to cope. Completely wrung out, we have to wait upon our Maker and Redeemer. We have to turn outward and upward because there's simply nothing left inside to which we can turn.

In the midst of our country's Civil War, Abraham Lincoln confronted this truth over and over again. Widely acclaimed as one of the greatest, if not the greatest President we've ever had and perhaps one of the greatest leaders in all of history, Lincoln was a man of enormous personal strength, ability, and integrity. But mired in the horror of our nation's war against itself he said: "I've been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My wisdom and all that about me were insufficient for the day."

At the end of ourselves, we wait on God for what only God can do. Israel says to Ezekiel, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are clean cut off." But God tells them, "Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord . . ."

This morning I venture to say that we all have dry and dead bones in us, both as individuals and as a congregation. We all have parts of us, both personally and as a church, that have been

sucked to the marrow whether through deep tragedy, misfortune, or evil that we've suffered, or significant wrongs that we've done, or inattentive mistakes that we've made, or stagnant routine into which we've slipped. But in this blessed Lenten season, we especially remember and celebrate that for a very long time the true and living God has shown keen interest in working closely with dry bones and rotting graves.

God brought homeless and hopeless Israel back home again. And not quite two weeks from now on Holy Saturday, God will sit with us again right next to Jesus' tomb. There and once more, the Spirit of almighty God will whisper in our ear, "Wait and see."

God whispers this every day to every dry and dead bone in us: "Wait and see. New life will come." This is the word of the Lord. Amen.