

The UMC of Berea
Ezekiel 37.1-14; John 11.17-44
5th Sunday in Lent

Both of today's readings—from the prophet Ezekiel and the Gospel of John—tell us something about death and new life: the end of some things and the beginning of others. Death and anxiety about death—or illness, despair, disconnection—often feel close to home for us but perhaps especially so during these past few weeks. And so, on this 5th Sunday in Lent—on the eve of Palm Sunday and Holy Week—it is fitting to hear Ezekiel preaching to a valley of dry bones and Jesus commanding Lazarus to come out of the tomb—and to wonder what all this means for us here and now.

Our story from Ezekiel is one many of us will have heard. We might even recall the old spiritual by James Weldon Johnson:

*...Back bone connected to the shoulder bone
Shoulder bone connected to the neck bone
Neck bone connected to the head bone
Now hear the word of the Lord.*

It is a wonderful old song and a wonderfully profound story: God leading Ezekiel out to “a certain valley,” in the spirit of the Lord, setting him down to notice those “dry bones.”

For the original audience of this story, the image of “dry bones” would have been significant. In their tradition, following death, the corpse was placed in a tomb to allow the flesh to decay. The body remained there until there was nothing left but “dry bones,” at which point those “dry bones” were placed in their final resting place: often a box or chest of some sort. So, “dry bones” signify not just death but a sort of absolute, utter finality: permanent disconnection from the living, which is precisely how the community around Ezekiel was feeling. They were literally in exile—in Babylon—devastated by disconnection from their familiar people, places, and routines.

In that context, God asks the prophet, “Human one”—or “mortal”—“can these bones live?” The Hebrew word translated here as “human one” or “mortal” is *ben adam*, most literally, “son of man.” It both recalls the creation story in Genesis 2 and foreshadows the phrase used throughout the Gospels for Jesus. It is intended here as a universal “calling out” of all humankind.

God puts the question to each of us: “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel attempts an answer: “Lord God, only you know.” It is hard to guess the tone of these words. Was the prophet trying to deflect or being humble or afraid? Either way, we can hear the uncertainty in Ezekiel's voice.

Having received no definitive answer, God commands action: “Prophesy!” It's not an answer to the question about whether the bones can live; it is an invitation to participate in what God is doing. God invites Ezekiel to participate, and the prophet obeys.

And while Ezekiel is obeying—prophesying—God begins the work of connecting bone to bone and then ligament, muscle, and skin. The work of resurrection begins. God works while the prophet speaks, but resurrection isn't yet complete. It seems to be more of a process than a single-moment event.

God commands Ezekiel again: “Prophesy to the breath.... Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live.” The Hebrew word for both “breath”

and “wind” here is *ruach*. It is used eleven times in these fourteen verses, beginning in verse 1 where it is the Lord’s “spirit” or “breath” or “wind” that leads Ezekiel into the valley. *Ruach* is that which sweeps over the face of the waters “in the beginning when God creates the heavens and the earth,” when “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep” (Genesis 1.1-2). It’s the breath of God, the spirit and wind of God: the breath of life that fills all creation, always.

And again, while Ezekiel prophesies, God is acting. Ezekiel speaks, and God breathes life into every individual, and the spirit of God—*ruach*—restores life and community, resurrecting “dry bones” into “an extraordinarily large beloved community.”

And God explains this miracle as allegory. To this point, everything has been expressed in the past tense; Ezekiel reports to us something that’s happened. Now, we shift to the present tense. “Human one”—“mortal,” “son of man,” God says again, addressing all of us—“these dry bones are the entire house of Israel.” That is, *any and all who are saying, who are feeling, “Our bones are dried up; our hope has perished. We are exiled, cut off, disconnected completely.”*

And then, for a third time, God gives a command to action—and the same action: “Prophesy!” And as Ezekiel engages in this action, the words shift finally to the future tense: God’s promise of action, God’s commitment to the beloved community, God’s faithfulness to our covenant of *shalom* or well-being. “My people, I will put my breath”—my “wind,” “spirit,” *ruach*—“within you, and you will live, and I will plant you on...fertile land”—a firm footing, a place to stand, re-connecting us, bone by bone, filling us with the breath of life.

That is the work—the action, the resurrection power—of God among us here and now—as in *every* season of exile or disconnection or feeling cut off from other people or from our normal rhythms and routines. That is the work of God now among us as our communities’ already most vulnerable really are under additional threat. God is making a way where it seems there’s no way, setting us on “fertile land” while it seems the ground beneath our feet is constantly shifting, causing us to be connected and to be community—to be church—in new ways while we’re physically apart. God is working for good, working for life, working for hope and health and well-being even in moments of anxiety, difficulty, and fear.

And what is our role in this—our invitation to participate in God’s resurrection work? We are told three times in today’s story, as we stand alongside Ezekiel: “Prophesy!” That is, bear witness to the present reality of One who comes among us, who hangs in with us, who is now and is always “the resurrection and the life,” at work in us and in the world, making all things new. Prophesy, God invites us: speak life into death, speak hope into places of despair, speak love into the lives of every person.

Exactly what that looks like may be different for each of us right now. Maybe it means setting aside a few minutes every day—or a few times each day—to sit or stand or lie down quietly and give attention to our breath: to breathe slowly, deeply, and with attention, knowing—trusting—that every breath is a gift from God—God’s own spirit, own breath or wind or *ruach*, still giving us new life.

Maybe it means making a difference in our neighborhood, starting with picking up the phone: speaking life, hope, love into the life of a neighbor, family member, or friend. We can’t speak without exhaling—sharing breath. So, when you listen to the voice of another person, listen for God’s spirit breathing through them. And when you speak to another person, do so knowing: God is breathing life through you.

Notice the evidence of God's presence and resurrection power all around us: signs of spring pushing through the soil, reaching toward the sun, filling the air with birdsong—reminders that God is working for life here and now. Notice the goodness of neighbors. Around the block from our home this past week, a neighbor had a table set up in their driveway, giving away puzzles and magazines, inviting folks to receive and enjoy—a simple expression of God's generosity, evidence that God is building community here and now.

“Prophecy!” God says to us today. “I am resurrection and life.” And God stands outside our tombs, whatever they are for us here and now—our fears or anxieties, disappointments or griefs—and shouts to us, whispers to us, “Come out!”

Come out and live. Come out and bear hope. Come out and be church—beloved community—trusting and convinced, as the apostle Paul prophesies to the early church in Rome, *that neither death, nor life, ...nor things present, nor things to come, ...[nor illness, nor fear, nor disconnection,] nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* (Romans 8.38-39)

Thanks be to God. Amen.