

Pastor Jim's sermon
Sunday, March 29, 2020
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45

I.

Dead.

Stone dead.

Dead as a doornail.

That is what the prophet Ezekiel thought as he wandered that dry valley, bleached bones crunching under his feet with each reluctant step.

Dead.

Dead and gone.

Dead to the world.

That's what Mary thought as she wept unrelentingly outside her brother's cold, dark tomb.

The voice of Job rings in their ears: "If mortals die, will they live again?"

No. They can never live again.

II.

Ezekiel is in exile.

If you joined us for Bible and Brew on Thursday, then you've heard this story recently. In 587BC the Babylonian Empire marched into Jerusalem and sacked it, taking the people of the southern kingdom of Judah into exile. Banished into Babylon, many despaired that Israel and Judah had finally met their end. The prophet Ezekiel prophesied during this time, warning Jerusalem that it would be destroyed if it did not return to God and then journeying with the Jews as they are forced into exile.

That is the context for today's reading. God takes Ezekiel to a valley filled with the bones of dead Israelites. Their bones bleached in the sun, crumbling to powder under Ezekiel's feet. And then God asks the preposterous question: "Can these bones live?" It's a rhetorical question, right? The obvious answer is, "No! Of course they can't!"

These dry bones are a metaphor for Israel and Judah. Having been crushed by warring empires and deported into exile, it's as if God asks: can Israel and Judah come back from such a resounding destruction? And the obvious answer is, "No! Of course they can't!"

III.

Mary is in exile.

Her brother, Lazarus, had fallen ill, and the family had hoped for a recovery. When Lazarus took a turn for the worse, Mary and her sister Martha sent word to their friend, Jesus. If anyone could help Lazarus, it was he.

Days passed and Jesus didn't come.
Then Lazarus passed and Jesus still didn't come.

And now Mary is exiled in her grief, isolated by the loss of her beloved brother, Lazarus, and devastated by the callous abandonment of her friend, Jesus. What was so important that Jesus could not be here to help?

Finally, four days after Lazarus' death, four days full of grief and pain and weeping and lament, Jesus arrives. And Mary is furious. "Where were you?" She asks through her tears. "If you had been here, my brother would not have died."

IV.

We are in exile, too, it seems.

This spreading global pandemic has us feeling lost and scared and abandoned by God. We have been displaced, not just by a fear of illness, but by all the social and economic fallout from the coronavirus. Like the valley of dry bones, death experiences seem to be all around us. Some are *literally* dying from the virus, but others are encountering death in other ways: loss of work; expectations to work harder in strange conditions; scarcity of food and supplies; fracturing of families under pressure; separation from loved ones; isolation; fear; anxiety; all of it feels like death. Parks, churches, movie theaters, gyms, restaurants, places that once bustled with life now lie desolate, deserted, dead.

We stand in the valley of the dry bones, casting around for any sign of life: another person, an animal, a tiny shoot budding from the ground. We stand at the sealed tomb, wishing with all our hearts that what lies dead inside could live again.

And where is God? "*If you had only been here...*"

V.

"Can these bones live?" God asks Ezekiel. "No! Of course not," Ezekiel thinks; but he knows better than to limit God. So he simply replies with a non-committal: "Oh Lord...y'know..." And then God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and as Ezekiel speaks, the impossible: bones coming together, muscle growing out, flesh wrapping around, bodies populating that deserted valley. "Speak breath into them!" God commands, and as Ezekiel speaks, spirit, wind, and breath fill the dead bodies of the valley as they come to life again.

"Take away the stone," Jesus says. But Martha protests: "why on earth would you want to do that? Lazarus is so dead that he's begun to stink."

“Did I not tell you to trust me?” Jesus asks, and the stone is removed. Then Jesus calls out in a loud voice, “Lazarus! Come out!” And he does.

VI.

These bones *can* live.

Dead mortals *will* live again.

Our readings today show us that there is life beyond exile and there is life beyond death. The nation of Israel, scattered and lost to exile in Babylon, was not lost to the God who loved them. Not even the devastation of exile could keep Israel from God. And Lazarus, four days dead and already beginning to rot, was not too far gone for the God who loved him. Not even the desolation of death can keep us from God.

God’s legacy is not death and destruction but life and resurrection. As we sit in our exile, as we wait to return to church or to work or to family and friends, it may seem like we may never return. As we dwell in our death experiences, as we grieve the loss of life and livelihood, it may seem like death is final. But our God is the God of the resurrection. Our God is the God of life; and new life will surely come.

I see it already. Even though we cannot gather together to worship at our church, I have been amazed by the new life we have established here on the web. These Sunday services are a great comfort to me; and our conversation at Bible and Brew on Wednesday was as deep and rich and powerful as it has ever been. Within and beyond our community, people are stepping up to help each other. Some who have lost work have focused their attention on volunteering at hospitals. Others, despite the threat of illness, continue hard at work for the good of the world. Everywhere people are sacrificing their own convenience for the good of their neighbors. And God is at work in all of it, breathing new life into this world.

We are all experiencing death in one way or another; but our God does not leave us there. Our God speaks to the bones. Our God shouts at the tomb. Out of desolation and death, our God brings life—and God is bringing it to you.

Amen.