5th Sunday in Lent (Year A)

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*Ezekiel 37:1-14*

*The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, ‘O Lord God, you know.’ Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on 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.’*

*So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

*Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’*

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For those of us who are practitioners of faith, we live in a place of profound tension. On the one hand, we see the world as it is: a place full of violence, division, and grief. And on the other hand, we also are called to see the world as God wills it to be *and* as God *promises* it to be. We practice our moral imagination not despite the broken condition of the world, but precisely *because* of it. But that’s not always an easy or natural thing to do; which is one of the reasons I’m most grateful for the fact that we are not called to hold onto that hope in isolation; but as a community.

The community that first received this bizarre story of dust, bone, and sinew was a community reeling in a severe theological crisis. You see, this story of resurrection, this story of bones rattling themselves together and wrapping themselves in skin at God’s behest came to the Israelites at the very beginning of what is known as the Babylonian Exile. In the sixth century BCE, the Babylonians conquered Israel and took them from their homes, thus beginning an approximately 70 year period of diaspora, division, and despair. I describe this as a *theological* crisis because the popular thinking of that day would deem the Israelites’ god as the loser in the conflict and the Babylonians’ gods as the “real” ones. In their eyes, YHWH had abandoned them and forsaken the holy covenant made to Abraham and Sarah.

And in the midst of this tangible and terrible trauma, comes the poet. A poet named Ezekiel. Some would call him a prophet but I choose to call him a poet, because poets stubbornly attend to the work of holy curiosity when the rest of us have thrown in the towel and called it a day. Poets are not the source of beauty and wonder but they testify to it, they pay attention and invite the rest of us to open ourselves to possibilities we would never have otherwise considered.

The poet is brought before a valley of dry bones. A place of death and dust, forgotten promises and dreams deferred. And God asks the poet, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel knows better than to answer that question; instead he sits back and let’s God do what God’s gonna do. He prophesies to the bones, as commanded, ‘dem bones, ‘dem bones, ‘dem dry bones start rattling back to life. And, in time, an army stands before the poet, a bulwark of blessing, promising God’s future and, consequently, the peoples’ future.

I wonder if this poetry of promise felt true or reliable to the Israelites first hearing it, as they were being carted away from their homes in chains. I wonder if the words of the Schema (hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one) felt particularly hopeful being uttered by the Jews in the trains on the way to the concentration camps? “Can these bones live” is perhaps one of the questions of our faith that can be both a painful one to ask, as well as a healing one to ask. Or perhaps both at the same time.

But one of the wonderful things about this story is that it is a story. And stories, good ones, *real* ones, outlast any particular moment of despair. They outlast chapters of strife and turmoil. They outlast tyrants. They outlast famines. They outlast captivities. They outlast all of those things that the apostle Paul tells us in the book of Romans will never separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And it is important that we share those stories, even and especially in the moments when we’re just not feeling it. We tell these stories, we ask this question (“can these bones live”) even when our hearts aren’t in it. We do this precisely because, as a community of faith, we trust that the day is coming when we can hear that promise with new hearts. We tell these stories to ourselves because God has told us, O Mortals, that these bones *can*, in fact, live. We may look at dust and see nothing but death; but God, my neighbors, looks at dust and sees life. Remember, Mortals, you who had dust smeared on your foreheads a few short weeks ago, remember what God is capable of doing with dust. We have been formed from the dust of the earth. Yes, these bones can live. And they *will* live, because the poet has spoken that God’s not finished with us.

And so, today, I want us to be poets for each other through a brief spiritual practice. One of the most important and life-sustaining parts of my week is the hour I spend downtown on Green St. with my therapist, Laura. And at one of our meetings last month, I was feelin’ down, y’all. Anxiety was rearing its ugly head, I was in the throws of grief mourning the death of my friend, Michael. I was feeling inadequate, broken, and beyond repair.

Laura looked at me with care and gentleness and asked me an important question. She said, “Stephen, if you could fast forward a year and have your future self say something to you here and now, what words of would you say to yourself.” I took a moment in silence to ponder her question. After a minute or so, I said, “You’re ok. You’re enough.” She then took out a sheet of paper and wrote those four words down and handed them to me. She invited me to seal them in an envelope, put it in my desk here at the church, and set an reminder on my calendar to open it in exactly one year.

As I prepared for this sermon, I realized her invitation was just another way of asking “Can these bones live?” I realized that her invitation was, in its own way, the poet’s practice of prophesying to bones even when they don’t feel like they’re capable of heeding God’s call to be resurrected. And, today, I invite each of us to be poet’s to ourselves, reminding ourselves that these bones can live.

When you entered the sanctuary today, you were handed an envelope and a sheet of paper. I invite you to take a few minutes, as Bill plays some music for us, to write a message of affirmation to yourself or to someone you love. It can be a message in the form of a few words of affirmation or perhaps a picture or drawing or a scripture that is meaningful to you. Whatever you’re going through right now, imagine what words of affirmation your future self would give you, looking back. What perspective would that version of you bring?

After you write your message of resurrection, or affirmation, or comfort, I invite you to place the paper in the envelope and seal it (you’re the only one who will see it). Then, write your address (or the address of the person you wish to give it to) *legibly* on the front of the envelope. Finally, you can place your envelope in the offering plate or hand them to an usher on your way out the door. Then, over the next year or so, in sporadic intervals, the church will places those letters of affirmation in the mail and we will trust that the message will be received at a time when it is needed. We will trust that resurrection is coming. We will trust that, yes, these bones will live.

Let us write our messages of affirmation.

*Write messages*.

In the name of God the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer, may all of us mortals say, Amen.