

Sermon Lent 5A
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I'd say "It's good to see you," but I can't really see your faces behind the glare of the windshields. So instead, I'll say what a couple of you often retort back to me: "It's good to be seen." It's good to be in your presence, to be worshiping God with you today, even through the protective shields that our vehicles can be for us now. It really is a spiritual boon to be here with you, just knowing that we are together, whether in body or in spirit (for those of you reading or viewing this at home).

Today, for our First reading, we get a passage that's all about coming together in body and in spirit - the Valley of Dry Bones. In this vision from the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord shows him a valley scattered with bones and says to him, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel."

Many images have been employed by the prophets to describe the sad state of the people of Israel: a barren vineyard, decimated farmland, even a harlot, but this image presented to Ezekiel of a mass of bones scattered and utterly abandoned across a dry valley is about as bleak as they get. So yeah, it's safe to say that the occasion for this this prophecy represents a LOW POINT in Israel's history. God's chosen people are crying out to him, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." They felt so far out of favor with the Lord, that they had no living hope for a future.

So what was this low point in Israel's history? Where were God's people that they felt so lost they had become like dry bones, void of life or direction? They were in Exile. They had been rescued from slavery in Egypt, they had made it through forty years in the wilderness, they had arrived in the promised land, and there built God a Temple in which to worship upon Mt. Zion... And then...The Babylonian army invaded, toppled their weakening monarchy, destroyed their capital city, demolished their sacred Temple, and sent them out of the Holy Land to go it alone in a strange and foreign land under pagan rule. "Cut off" indeed.

It seemed as though they had lost liberty to express their faith freely, lost their closely-held community identity and just about everything else that once exhibited signs of life, vitality, growth or any kind of a future. They felt just about as vital as a valley of dead and dried up old bones. While yes, lives were lost in the Babylonian invasion, the bones in Ezekiel's vision didn't represent the lost, but instead those who had survived. Their lives had been spared, but for all intents and purposes, they felt as good as dead. What they were crying out to God for was not loss of life, but feeling lost from life in the favor of the Lord. They couldn't return to their homes, to their lives, to worship God in the Temple their ancestors had built with their own hands. They felt spiritually dead and utterly forgotten.

We are at a low point...in the history of our nation and our world. We aren't exiled from our homes - quite the opposite - we may feel imprisoned in them. The enemy is not an invading army, but an infecting virus. And we feel afraid, anxious, lost, perhaps even forgotten. For me, just hearing the word "pandemic" seems unreal, as the idea always seemed like such a far-off abstract threat. But the news reports are quite real - not only the statistics, but the real-life human experiences. I know for the healthcare professionals among us, this situation is all too real.

On top of all that, not being able to gather with our beloved Saints in our own sanctuary just adds insult to injury. I absolutely understand and agree with the reasons we can't be together in-person, but the feeling that we'd been exiled from our worship space began to make me feel unanchored, floating adrift in a sea of unknowns. While what we are experiencing is a far cry from the Exile of Israel, we can relate to the feeling of being lost or cut off. We too know what it's like to look around us and ask ourselves: What does the future hold? How will get through this? Where is God in all this?

When we encounter the prophet Ezekiel today, he himself has been set adrift in a sea of despair. And then, the scriptures tell us, "the hand of the Lord came upon him." Out of aimlessness, came direction. And the direction was a vision, a command and an answer. "The hand of the Lord came upon me," Ezekiel writes, "and he brought me out." Out of what? Out of the place where he was? Out of his present reality? Out of despair? The hand of the Lord brings him out, and sets him down in the middle of the valley of dry bones. He's there to give him an answer. But first, he poses a question. The Lord asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Strange that in a sea of questions, God puts before the prophet another question. I'm sure when God came to him, all he wanted was an answer. "Just an answer, God." "Just a clear-cut, black-and-white, once-and-for-all answer to the dire and desperate situation we find ourselves in." But, instead, he gets a question: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Now, this isn't a question of knowledge - for surely God alone knows the potential for life in these bones; Instead, it's a question of faith. "Mortal," God is saying, DO YOU BELIEVE that "these bones can live?" "Mortal, do you believe there hope for the abandoned? "Mortal, do you believe there hope in even the bleakest of situations? "Mortal, are there any ashes from which God cannot cause new life to rise? "Mortal, tell me, can these bones live?"

And then, God gives him a command: "Prophecy to the bones." "Speak my word to them. "You want to see if they can live? "You want to see if there is really nothing I can't do, stand up, and do what you were called to do, Speak my Word of life to the despairing Speak hope for the hopeless so will hear and believe that there is no darkness in which my light cannot shine, no valley of death that I cannot bring you out of, that nothing is impossible with God.

So in faith, Ezekiel speaks. And in obedience, the bones rise, and they come together bone to bone, with sinew, flesh and skin, And God says to the bones: "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live." This breath, Ruach, is the same breath of God that moved over the waters of Creation, the same spirit God breathed into Adam, formed of the dust of the earth. Without God's Spirit, we do not live. Bone can stand upon bone, the pieces and parts can all be in place, but without the breath of God, there is no life. Ezekiel did his part, he prophesied to the bones. And God did his part: He took what the prophet had done in obedience to his calling, and into it he breathed life

When Ezekiel faced this question, "Can these bones live?" the answer was yes... but not by their own power. The bones did not come to life of their own volition, but only at the behest of the Word, and through the breath of the Spirit. The dried-up multitude of the whole house of Israel, who felt as though they breathed their last, did not rise again by their own effort, but only through faithfulness to the Word and obedience to the Spirit, which brought them out of exile and restored them to their home, to rebuild the temple, and reestablish themselves as a thriving nation in the Land of Milk and Honey.

Ezekiel was not the first, and we won't be the last to ask, "God, Where are you? Have you abandoned us? "Or will you breathe your Spirit into our bones and prove your faithfulness, yet again?" When God's people were slaves in Egypt, the answer was yes. When they wandered in the wilderness, the answer was yes. When they were exiled to Babylon, the answer was yes. When we yearned for a Messiah, the answer was yes. When the blind longed to see, when the lame cried for healing, when the sinner wept for forgiveness... when faithful women stood expectant outside the tomb of Lazarus, and outside the tomb of Jesus, on Easter morning, the answer was yes.

And for us, his answer is yes. The Spirit of God, that moved over waters of creation, that breathed life into Adam, that reanimated those old bones, that re-entered Lazarus' lungs, that rushed through the house on the day of Pentecost, was breathed in to each and every one of you at your baptism, so that in you forever lies the promise of new life.

I wish I could stand before you today and give you answers. I wish I could turn on the news and hear black-and-white once-and-for-all solutions for the situation we find ourselves in. But I can't. But instead, what I can offer you is hope. That's why we're here, anyway. Hope. We're here because we are people of hope, we are people who believe that there is no low point from which God cannot revive us. We are here because we are God's water-washed and Spirit-born hope-filled Resurrection people, so we don't have to wonder whether God will be faithful. We know. And our own redeemed lives are a testament to the power of God to bring new life up from the ashes.

We don't know what is next, but we know God is with us. We don't know what will come, but we know God is for us. We don't have all the answers, but what we have is the Spirit of God breathing through us in words of hope and healing in gifts of love and service, a glimpse of God's peace in a world shrouded in worry.

"Mortal, do you believe that these bones can live?"

"Yes, Lord, I believe."