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A beautiful story for our time

2 Corinthians 4:5-12

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From our second lesson today: Paul writes: We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed [and a few verses later writes]... We do not lose heart.

I'm going to leave that text as a base for two things today. First, for a beautiful story from the book of Ezekiel. And I will close with one word. First, join with me in a word of prayer.

May these words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts and minds, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our Strength, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Come with me to a story from long ago...no... not to a story...but into a story. A place to see not just a world of the past, but the worlds we inhabit today.

The story is from the book of the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37. Ezekiel was a prophet whose words spoke to two different contexts. The first section of Ezekiel speaks to his own people during a time when the people were wealthy and secure. In that time of wealth Ezekiel confronted the people for having little interest in their God, and little interest in taking care of the poor. The second section of Ezekiel speaks to his people in a very different time. The faith community, once strong and powerful, was dispersed to the ends of the Babylonian empire. The people of faith had been taken from their land. The places of faith that once seemed to hold them together it seemed, were but a memory. Even more painfully, the children of these exiles, it seemed to their parents and grandparents, were more attracted to the power and wealth of the Babylonian Empire than they were to being people of faith. The mission of being the people of faith looked, for all the world, to be a thing of the past.

Into this time the prophet Ezekiel has a vision...

Ezekiel is carried to the top of a hill with a view of the valley floor below. The word of the Lord comes to Ezekiel on that hilltop: "MORTAL, WHAT DO YOU SEE?" Mortal, human being, what do you see?

Ezekiel looks out on the valley below and replies, “I see bones. Bones. And more bones. A valley of bones. Dry bones.”

“MORTAL, CAN THESE BONES LIVE?” Ezekiel, knowing that he is Mortal, a Human being, who knows what he knows—and gets it wrong often enough—says before God, “I don’t know.” Then adds, “You know.”

The God speaks again: “PREACH TO THE BONES, MORTAL. PREACH TO THE BONES.”

What was the human being Ezekiel to do? A valley of dry bones in front of him, but the God speaking to him. So... he preaches to the bones.

He preaches to the bones of a God who moved over the face of the chaos at the beginning of time, and from that seemingly future-less chaos creates a beautiful world.

He preaches to the bones of a God who delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt when it was clear that there was no future for their faith community. When the powers of the empire that faced them, made whatever they had to bring to the table seem like dust and ashes.

He preaches to the bones of a God who walked with Abraham and Sarah. Abraham and Sarah who were given a promise by God to be the mother and father of a great nation—with descendants as countless as the stars in the sky. How many children did they have when they started their journey? None. After ten years on the road. None. How could this be? What was God doing? Here they were in old age. How many children. Still none. Then— one blessed day—one. Isaac. The Hebrew name that means Laughter. And that was only the beginning of their story.

How long did Ezekiel preach on that hill? I wonder. Not just one night. All week. Did months and years pass with Ezekiel preaching to the bones? Probably. Things that matter take time, don’t they?

Then, one day... Ezekiel heard something... or did he just think he did? Was that a sound in the valley? A quiet soft sound. Something clicked softly. Or was that the wind? It was like a tug you feel on fishing line... was that something... or am I imagining it? Then there was another. And another. Click. Click. Click. Then you know the story—you know the song—The foot bone connected to the anklebone. Click. The anklebone connected to the shinbone. Click. The shinbone connected to the knee bone. Click. All around the valley there was a sound of clattering as the dry bones came together. Then as he looked over the valley with his eyes so wide open, flesh began to wind itself around the bones, then skin covered the flesh. But the bodies stood stalk still in the valley. Without life. Without joy. Without a song. Because there was no *Ruach* in the bodies.

Now, *Ruach* is one of those Hebrew words that means more than one thing. *Ruach* is the Hebrew word for breath; it is also the Hebrew word for wind and the Hebrew word for spirit. There was no *Ruach* in the community. No breath. No wind. No spirit.

Then, the God spoke again to Ezekiel. “PREACH TO THE *RUACH*, MORTAL. CALL FOR THE *RUACH* TO COME ON THESE LIFELESS ONES.”

So, Ezekiel preached to the *Ruach*, called on the wind, prayed for the spirit, and prayed some more. How long did he pray? How long do you think? All day. All night. All year. How long? And then, unexpectedly, there it was. A gentle breeze began blowing through the valley. The *Ruach* of God blew like a fresh breath through the valley. And as Ezekiel looked on, the *Ruach* entered the

bodies of the lifeless ones that had shape now, but no joy, and they began to stir. Called together by the Word, inspired by the Spirit, the once dry bones began to move again. Ezekiel gazed at the scene from the hilltop. And he could hear his own heart pounding. He could hardly breathe.

His faith community was moving forward, singing, praying, dancing, laughing, loving. What a sight for a person of faith!

What does this mean? Well, in our heads, we have a pretty good idea what the prophecy could have meant to the exiled people. In the experience of the loss of so much that mattered to them; in the experience of being “dry bones,” Ezekiel’s vision from a hilltop rang out. God, in God’s own good time, in God’s own mysterious ways, would bring new shape to the people. God, in God’s own good time, would bring new life to a people, to a faith community. In spite of all the evidence to the contrary, there was hope in God’s word bringing people together, in God’s spirit blowing through the valleys of their lives.

But entering the story today, what does this mean to you? To me? What do the valleys in your life look like? What do the valleys in your faith communities look like? How does the hilltop vision of Ezekiel speak into that valley? Not in your head now, but in your heart, in your heart of hearts. What does this mean? I’ll leave the story with you to speak to you in your own time and place.

But let me tell you, for a moment, how I hear the story speaking as a bishop of the ELCIC, a bishop, as it happens, retiring this summer.

I see a lot of bones in our valley. Some quite dry bones. For three years or so we shut down our buildings for the pandemic. We masked. We fought over masking. Some got sick. Some died. Some were isolated for years in care homes. Yes, everyone was afraid. I can hardly believe we lived through such a strange time. But now, four years later the return to vitality in most of our churches has been slower than most of us imagined. During the pandemic, I imagined the end of the pandemic to be like the end of World War II that I see in the movies. Parades in the street, a burst of excitement and energy. How great would that be. But that’s not at all how it happened is it? Our faith communities trickled back into community, as the many waves of the pandemic came and went. In many congregations we are nowhere near our pre-pandemic strength. There is no foreseeable time when we return to a past size and strength. Maybe there never will be exactly a return to former days?

So, the God’s question to Ezekiel is still a burning one, isn’t it? MORTAL, HUMAN BEING, CAN THESE BONES LIVE? If they do, what will these faith communities look like? And how long will it take?

The God’s other words to Ezekiel I find even more profound today. What are we called to do in the text?

PREACH TO THE BONES, MORTAL. Preach the Word, Human being.

If you are a preacher, yes, preach to the bones—take up your calling with passion. But for the whole faith community the word speaks.

Gather together, study the scriptures together. And study the scriptures on your own. So that you both are sustained in your faith and so that you can become articulate about your faith with others. Preach to the bones people of God. And go on learning and preaching.

PREACH TO THE WIND, MORTAL. Pray for the Spirit, Human being.

Gather together as community. Gather where someone will say, “Let us pray”—and you do. And in the world we live in, it is so easy to forget to pray. Pray when you are on your own. In the morning when you rise. At the table giving thanks. When you lay down to sleep. Pray. Sometimes use words. But always pray.

Preach to the bones, people of God. Pray for the wind.

Preach to the bones, people of God. Pray for the wind.

For how long? Will we see in our lifetime a renewal of faith in ourselves or in our faith communities?

I don't know. God knows.

Preach to the bones, people of God. Pray for the wind.

Preach to the bones, people of God. Pray for the wind.

That's the story for you to enter into.

Now, let me close with one Word

I love Jurgen Moltmann's work. He is known as the Theologian of hope. Moltmann says this about the journey of people of faith. To put it too briefly perhaps, he says this. People of Hope, he says, are not “optimists.” Optimists are people who are sure “I am going to get what I want.” This is nothing more than selfishness. People of hope are not pessimists either. Pessimists are just people who are sure that they are never going to get what they want. That is nothing more than despair. People of hope, says Moltmann, base their lives on the resurrection of Christ as God's decisive word to us. Hope, he says, stands against Death, not just against death as the end of life, but hope stands against all the destructive ways of death: starvation, violence, greed, hatred, apathy. Hope stands against all the ways of death. Moltmann puts it even more clearly. He says, that in our lives we know we do suffer the “No” of God. You and I know what that looks like. That phone call late at night. The report from the medical examination. As a church, we have seen a lot of “No” from God these last three years. But Moltmann says this is what Easter means: Though we may suffer the No of God in many ways, God's last word in this time, in this era, in this lifetime, in this body—here is the One Word—God's last word is YES.

Preach to the bones, Mortals.

Pray for the Spirit, Mortals.

But always remember the one word, that though we may suffer the “NO” of God in many ways as people, as a church--remember that God's last word. . .is YES.

And that makes all the difference.

Amen.