

Them Bones

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A – Ezekiel 37:1-14

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, April 6, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

With this morning's readings, we sure don't have to wonder much what season of the Church Year we happen to be in, do we? This morning we're treated to Paul's reminder that the flesh is death. For our Gospel lesson, we're greeted by the stench of a man dead for four days. And then there's *this* cheery story of a vast valley of dry bones.

Something about this morning's reading from the book of the prophet Ezekiel makes people cringe. It is, for many, a thoroughly *depressing* story. Our forbearers, these folks might argue, sure knew what they were doing when they put this reading from Ezekiel on the Fifth Sunday in Lent.

And there is good reason for the tone of this story. Ezekiel speaks to us from one of the lowest points of Israel's history. For generations, Israel tottered on the edge of disaster, courting the favor of first one then another of the powerful nations of the region. Ezekiel's fellow prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah and Isaiah had been called to warn Israel to return to right relationship to God before *destruction* came.

But Ezekiel writes from the *other* side of catastrophe, from the *other* side of annihilation, from the *other* side of near extinction. Weary of dealing with the vacillations of a puny kingdom that stood astride major trade routes, Babylon had brought its vast power to bear on Judah, and Judah had *crumbled* beneath the weight. The walls of Jerusalem, the beautiful and proud city of David, once the capital of a vast empire, had been reduced to rubble. Much of the population had been uprooted from their homes to be resettled elsewhere among the empire's other conquered territories. Still others were carried away in chains as captives to serve as slaves – and as examples – in the conqueror's capital city. And the Temple, the crowning glory of a once great nation – the Temple, the central cite of worship for the nation – the Temple, the symbol not only of Israel's God, but of Israel's very *identity* – the Temple, had been ransacked and looted. The nation of Israel no longer existed, and her people, the chosen people of the one true God, had been scattered. The earlier prophets had declared God's promise that a remnant of Israel would be spared. But to the people of Ezekiel's time, that promise seemed to have been forgotten. God apparently *had* abandoned his people to destruction. All was lost. No hope was left.

Caught up by the Spirit of God, Ezekiel saw the aftermath of the battle from its spiritual dimension. In the Spirit of God, Ezekiel toured the great valley of carnage, *filled* with the remains of the fallen. But these dead had been dead for a *very* long time. As the flesh had rotted, scavengers of the land and scavengers of the air had plucked at it and stripped it from the bones. They had torn pieces of the corpses and carried them away, scattering the bones in disassembled heaps upon the valley floor. In the desert of destruction, the bones had been bleached gleaming white by the glaring sun, and they had been dried to dust by the withering wind. The battlefield was a horrifyingly fresh sight to the prophet – but the fallen had been dead a long, long, *long* time. In the words of the prophet, the bones of the fallen people of God were *yavashe ma'oth*, they were dry, *very* dry. “The people,” says the word of the Lord, “the people say, ‘Our bones are dried up, *avdah tikvateinu*, our hope...’ the people say, ‘is *gone*.’”

When God asks Ezekiel if these bones can live, he can only reply with deferential incredulity, “God, only *you* can know.”

It is this part of the story that makes people cringe. It is this part that makes people think, “yeah, dry bones, Lent... that figures.” Five weeks into our own time of trial and temptation, this far along in our season of prayer and penitence, this deep in the vale of self-examination and self-denial, why not really *wallow* in this valley of dead, dry bones.

But then, amid the shrouding silence of death, a sound is heard. From within that immense pile of lifelessness, there is a rustling, as bone shifts against bone. There is a rattling, as them dry bones join themselves together in their proper order. There is a rumbling, as sinews, tendons and muscles form onto the assembled skeletons, and skin envelops the lifeless corpses, completing at least the *form* of humanity.

Then through the prophecy of Ezekiel, God acts a second time. Over the valley of death, God calls forth the same breath that gave life at the *beginning* of creation. God’s own breath, God’s own Spirit, God’s own *life*, the *Ruach Yahweh* fills the re-formed bodies — with the breath of life. A vast multitude of living, breathing humanity fills the desolate valley where only very dry, very dusty, very *dead* bones had lain before.

Though Israel *thought* that all life was gone, though Israel *thought* that God had turned his back, though Israel *thought* that God had forsaken his promise and abandoned his people, though Israel *thought* that all hope was lost, God declares otherwise. God declares that that has *not* happened. God declares that that will *never* happen. God declares that that *can* never happen. God, *their* God will redeem his people. God, *their* God will tear *open* the graves of the dead. God, *their* God will cause them to stand again, will cause them to *live* again in his presence. God, their God – God, *our* God will breath into us his *own* breath. God, *our* God will restore to us the fullness of the promise that he had made to our ancestors, to Abraham and his children – *forever*. God, *our* God will give us life.

Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of dry bones is not a story of death and despair. It is a story of hope. It is a story of renewal. It is a story of *resurrection*. Because at the end of the vision, that dry, dead valley was teeming with life. And “to set the mind on the flesh is death,” Paul reminds us, “but to set the mind on the Spirit... is life and peace.” And Lazarus *wasn’t* stinking on the *fifth* day after his death.

“*Od lo avdah tikvatienu*” we join the anthem of the people of God, “our hope is *never* lost.” The message of God is *always* one of hope, *always* one of resurrection. Despite the trappings of our own sometimes morbid self-absorption, the message of Lent is *always* one of hope. Even as we step deeper into the passion shadows of Holy Week, the message is *always* resurrection. The message is that from the stone cold, dry darkness of death, God called forth his own Son, to breathe again the breath... of *life*, to speak again his message of hope for the whole world... and for me... and for you.

Here is the message of this morning’s readings. Here is the message of our liturgical calendar. Here is the message of *all* of history, and for this very moment: From dryness and darkness and death, God always, God always, God *always* calls forth life.

I’ll save the “alleluia” a few steps longer. But... thanks be to God.