

March 29, 2020 5th Sunday in Lent
Sermon: Can These Bones Live?

I saw this posted on NextDoor Mount Hermon: “Day 9 of quarantine. I struck up a conversation with a spider. He seems like a nice fellow. He told me he is a web designer.”

Beside reading jokes on the internet during this quarantine, I have been watching the news and have seen a grim situation. The virus grows, and the U.S. now has more cases than any country on earth. There are images of refrigerator trucks storing the dead in New York City, and tragic stories of the heroism of those who have died. How do we keep hope alive during this crisis?

It is instructive to look at Ezekiel when he saw the vision of the dry bones coming to life. He, like us, saw grim images. He saw a valley very full of very dry bones. Some believe this was the battlefield of Meggido, one of Israel’s greatest defeats.

Ezekiel, like us, was hit hard emotionally. He was a priest and for him to see bones improperly buried would break his heart, the way our hearts are broken in hearing the stories of those who have lost their lives. Like us, he and his nation were in exile, separated from their work, their families, their hopes and their dreams.

It is in this setting that God gives a vision to Ezekiel. In this dramatic vision the Hebrew word for Spirit appears 10 times. It can be translated as wind, breath, as in the breath of life, or breath of God as in the life giving Holy Spirit. The power of the spirit is key to the passage, and the key to keeping hope alive.

After God’s shows Ezekiel this grim picture he asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” A question that strikes deep into his heart. Bound up in it, are the questions about the future destiny of him and his countrymen and women. As a priest and a prophet he wants Israel to have a future and hope. He exercises as much faith as he can responding, “Lord, you know”.

The Lord does know, and he answers Ezekiel, saying “Prophecy to these bones and I will put muscle and flesh on these bones and give them breath and they will live, and you will know that I am God.” And that is exactly what happens, Ezekiel prophesies to the bones. Talk about a tough audience. But then, while he is standing there, he hears the four winds kick up. Underneath that he hears a small rumbling. It grows louder, like an earthquake. As the noise grows the bones are jumping and joining one to one another. Then muscle climbs over each skeleton. The Hebrew text pictures muscle from the feet rising up until it covers the whole body. While still laying down they are blanketed in skin almost like someone throwing a sheet or throw rug out over inanimate furniture.

Did Ezekiel recognize any of his fellow Israelites laying waxen and dead? They still had not the breath of the Spirit. Ezekiel is told by God to prophesy, breathe into them, and the four winds that Ezekiel hears in the background intensify and become, I am sure, like the mighty rushing wind that Luke writes about in Pentecost. The same heavenly Spirit that brought the defeated

church back on their feet after the death of the Lord. The corpses are filled with the Spirit and stand on their feet, a vast powerful, mighty army. You can almost hear them murmuring to each other, “What just happened here?”

Ezekiel wonders the same thing and God answers giving the meaning of the vision, saying “Son of Man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, “Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off”.

What a description of our current situation. For us, not only does our whole nation, but the whole world feels hopeless and cut off. We are sheltering in place and this virus has become the scene of one of the greatest battlegrounds in history. We are looking for hope. We are looking for the Spirit that will make all of us a vast army, a powerful force working together to overcome this.

Certainly in the news every night we hear stories that are profiles in courage both large and small. We see the human spirit inspired by, I believe, the divine Spirit fighting against the death, fear, defeat and hopelessness. God says to Ezekiel to tell the people of Israel that he will open the graves and bring people back to Israel. We are like Israel who experienced exile. We are in exile from our jobs, from our hopes, from our dreams. God’s word still proclaims hope in a dark and tragic situation. When I was writing this sermon, Lorraine, my spouse and shelter in place partner asked, “How is the sermon coming?” I said I have done a lot of language work. Now I need to check to see how Augustine, Luther, and Calvin dealt with this text. She said, “What have they got to say? They are all dead”. I gained this insight. Ezekiel is long gone but his words still have something to say to us. In this crisis the word of God has not only something to say, but the power to heal and to guide us. And give us hope. I believe through the guidance of the Spirit those who have come before us stand as a great army of witnesses.

The witness of the church in our time and Ezekiel’s vision is that God is the source of hope. Even now we see first responders who faithfully and courageously work to save lives. Even now we see scientists who do all they can to develop drug protocols. Even now we hear of volunteers who sew protective clothing. Even now we see videos of those quarantined in Italy on their balconies singing each night.

I believe that on the other side of this suffering we will no longer see a valley of dry bones. Like Ezekiel we will see a vast army of people who have fought death, who have kept the faith and who are a mighty force that will continue to change this world forever. By God’s grace, I believe that this army can and will build a better world on the other side of this valley.

Prayer: Lord of all give us hope in place of despair, love in place of fear, and faith in place of doubt so the we can stand as a living army inspired by your Spirit to build a new world. In the Risen Lord’s name we pray. Amen