PENTACOST SUNDAY

Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

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May 23, 2021

*“Prophesying to Bones”*

We are used to the Bible speaking to us in metaphor and symbol. This is a good thing. It is a very *visual* way of communicating and helpful when it comes to remembering. The problem is: we are so used to the stories and their accompanying images that they run the danger of losing their impact on us or morphing into something unrelated to their original intent.

This famous story from Ezekiel is a good example. All we have to do is *hear* the phrase “dry bones,” and many of us immediately think of this passage.

Some of us immediately begin to hum the old song, *Dem Bones*. It is an old great song, a *fun* song to sing—which is why we often teach it to our children. The problem is that the objective of this passage is not meant to be playful. It is not even meant to be a song.

This is serious business. Think about it: when Ezekiel was set down in the middle of that valley filled with bones, he must have been terrified, horrified, even disgusted.

Being a priest (as well as a prophet), Ezekiel took one look at those bones and realized that he would be ritually unclean if he came into direct contact with those human remains [Leviticus 22:4-6]. So, to be set down “in the middle” of a plain full of them would have been a nightmarish situation for him.

But it gets worse. After the prophet realizes his predicament, Ezekiel tells us that the first thing God did was: *“He led me all around them.”* He said this by using the Hebrew expression *saviv-saviv*, which means, “round and round.” The expression is found often in Ezekiel, Chapters 40–43, and it makes the point that Ezekiel, under divine impulsion, has to keep moving in and around, through the bones, a truly grisly circumambulation for a prophet-priest like himself.

The terror would also have been to think that so many had been killed at one time. He would have remembered the crushing war between Israel and the Babylonians that resulted in Israel’s exile in Babylon. This, he probably thought, was the army that had been vanquished.

The notation that the bones were “very dry” [v. 2] indicates that they had remained unburied for a long time in the plain, a sign not only of the duration of their abandonment, but also the degree to which the remains had been desecrated. A proper burial was one of the most pressing concerns of an ancient Israelite (and of most peoples in general, ancient and modern), and for bones to remain exposed to the elements long enough for them to become desiccated was a sign of extreme neglect.

Happily, if I can use such a word at this point, the bones are not forgotten by God, nor by God’s Spirit. In a mighty act of memory and caring, all those bones are lifted off the ground where they had been left, deserted for all those years. The very action of knowing where the bones were laid—of not forgetting, but instead, coming back to bear witness to them—this, in and of itself, is a powerful act of love.

Let me reiterate that: *remembering is an act of courage and love.* And so, the passage begins with an action that includes Ezekiel in an act of divine remembering—and then *literally* re-membering, re-forming, re-building those piles of bones into human bodies.

After a mad clattering of bone-on-bone, the valley of bones are connected and covered with muscle and flesh. However, they are not yet alive. It takes one more act of divine power to animate them again. It takes the breath of life, which God is pleased also to supply.

There are a couple of things I would like us all to notice about this story. First, and foremost: Ezekiel had God’s companionship and guidance throughout the ordeal. God was with him every step of the way.

The second thing to notice is that God gives Ezekiel the task of raising those bones himself. I think most of gloss-over this fact. We know that Ezekiel cannot do this on his own. It does take God’s power to accomplish this. However, even though God gives him the exact words to say, God requires *Ezekiel* to say them. And as he does, the dead are brought back to life.

Finally, God corrects Ezekiel’s notion that this valley of dry bones might have been the fallen warriors of some recent battle. In verse 11, God says to Ezekiel: *‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.* [v. 11] They are the ones who had grown tired and discouraged by their captivity in Babylon. They are the ones who have begun to believe that they were as good as dead. They are the ones who are beginning to forget who their God was, and to whom they belonged.

To these people languishing in their sorrow and hopelessness, God says:

*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. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I 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.’* [v. 12-14]

In other words: these are people who have suffered so much that they are convinced that their suffering is going to get the last word of triumph in their lives. To these people God sends Ezekiel to prophesy, to speak God’s words of remembrance and life. God has heard their cries and has not forgotten or forsaken them.

This is one of the stories we hear on Pentecost Sunday because it is a story of rebirth and new beginnings. It is a day in which we remember and celebrate the power of God’s Spirit and the depth of God’s love. We celebrate again that we are never forgotten, and that God’s Holy Breath of life is always near at hand to lift us out of our graves and restore us to new life.

Most of all, we celebrate the ministry of life God’s church has been given. Like Ezekiel, we have been given the task of breathing new life into the exiles we find all around us. During this past year, especially, there have been a great many of them, and we have been some of them.

So, today is the day to give thanks for the many times we have played the part of Ezekiel and have prophesied to dry bones—to people who have felt hopeless and at the end of their rope. Let us give thanks for:

* the many members of our family and friends who have “checked-in” on us as we sheltered at home;
* the people who continued to deliver the mail, and work in the grocery stores, and at other essential jobs;
* the people who ran errands and grocery shopped;
* the teachers who taught online and did everything they could to keep our children and youth from falling too far behind;
* and the many, many others in our communities who were determined to keep us all “afloat” despite the circumstances.

But this is the place where we begin the offering of God’s holy breath—the breath that has been breathed into us. There are many more places where God’s breath is needed and we, the church, cannot rest until we have fulfilled our mission. One theologian, John Holbert has put it this way:

*Until we hear all the rattling of these dry bones in our valleys, any celebration of the church is premature. A church that dwells in the valley of dry bones needs to recognize its own contract with the culture of death and then needs to speak the word of prophecy, echoing the ancient cry of Ezekiel, "O YHWH, can these bones live?" And it must answer not in ambiguity but in certainty, "YHWH, you know," but so do we. These bones can live, and we are in the surgical business of aiding our God in their and our regeneration to a fuller humanity.* (Patheos 2015)

This is our call to mission. So, let us also consider the community in which we live, and where else God’s breath of life is needed. Let us be bold and courageous enough to speak our God-given words of prophetic and powerful love to:

* to decision makers in our communities as they work toward solutions to the gun violence so many of us continue to encounter;
* to political struggles in Congress where winning has become the only objective and integrity and humility seem to have become quaint ideas of the past;
* to corporations and communities who can have a tremendous impact on reviving the land and water and air so that climate change may be mitigated for the well-being of future generations;
* to groups where racial division and hatred are harbored and encouraged—let ours be a voice of reconciliation and peace.

Friends, we are a fortunate people because we are loved by a God who has given us the Holiest of Spirits, who guides us and never leaves us and who leads us into life and gives us the words of life to speak to others. So, let us go ahead together, to proclaim the love and peace of Christ. Let us walk through valleys of the dry bones celebrating and rejoicing as they spring up to new life through the love of God, the unity of Christ, and the life-giving power of the Spirit. Let it be so, Amen.