

Reflection Lent 5 Welcome to today's reflection. Sunday 29 March 2020

Our worship resources don't take you to the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel 27: 1-14, but I'm going to start there in this reflection: so here it is...(NRSV)

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I 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."

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Evidence from modern warfare suggest that the vision Ezekiel sees is far too common. I recall studying at school horrific images from the Nazi Concentration camps after liberation, when the full extent of what had happened was revealed. A few decades later we witnessed Pol Pot doing the same in Cambodia. Places of bones have been discovered after the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina in the 1990's and from what we know, there are further atrocities in Myanmar of the Rohingya people. They are shocking images: lives taken, the sacred human body discarded, and left unburied in shallow graves, or in Ezekiel's image, left in a valley. An ultimate testimony to human hatred: and to a community, defeat and humiliation. Perhaps there was nobody left to bury them?

My life has been spared witnessing such horror. Yet, if we can imagine Ezekiel seeing this vision of dried bones in a valley; if we could but for a moment take ourselves to the valley where the hand of the Lord had lead us, guiding us among the remnants of life, would we be able to speak the words Ezekiel is invited to utter?

“Prophesy to these bones, and say to them O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD...I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”

We all may have witnessed this week on Television, pictures of convoys of military trucks leaving Italian cities, carrying coffins of those who have died in this worldwide pandemic. I see the images: I can barely comprehend them. We may also have seen doctors, nurses and other medical workers in interviews, near exhaustion, in tears. “We are here to help and we are overwhelmed.”

O breath of life, from the four winds, come save us, breathe upon these slain...

My heart has been heavy with such images. My heart has been scared for all human life; those who suffer and those who are working to care and save them. Would I have the courage, the trust to speak a word of Hope to these? And what would that word of hope be at a world-wide level?

This universal image of human loss is paralleled today with the Gospel story of Lazarus’ family at Bethany, in grief at Lazarus’ death. Utter hopelessness in a family and community, over the death of a beloved brother and valued community member. The stories in the Bible of Mary, Martha and Lazarus reveal some stark realities of family life, that are reflected in all families. Sisters can be so different from each other: they can get frustrated with each other: they can respond differently to the same situations: they even experience Jesus differently. In this story, they are drawn together in grief: and together they are in the deep disappointment of Jesus’ late arrival, the death of their dear brother, surrounded by the grieving community.

“If you had been here, my brother would not have died.”

One sister can bring words of her hope to Jesus; Martha can speak the faith she knows; *“But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him...I know he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”* The other sister, Mary, doesn’t speak these words of hope or faith: she needs to show Jesus, and be with him in her tears. Tears can be words of hope too sometimes. And tears can be a prayer also: even a prayer of faith in a time of deep loss.

I’m reminded of the words from the Robin Mann song *“Brother, Sister, let me serve you”*, where the lyrics say: ‘I will weep when you and weeping, when you laugh, I’ll laugh with you.’ Jesus wept when we saw the grave, and wept with Mary’s tears and the community. Jesus’ tears in this moment, pray a prayer in and of themselves.

In the Greek, the way this is described in John’s gospel gives us an insight into the depth of his emotion. Jesus was greatly disturbed in his spirit: and that same phrase will be used by the gospel writer as Jesus speaks to his disciples of his own impending death. Such is his love of Lazarus, such is his love of Mary and Martha in their grief.

In moments of such loss and grief what do we lean on to help us through? From where does our help come? Paul’s words about death losing its’ sting have never really comforted me (1 Corinthians 15:55). Those words may give me something of a greater hope beyond this particular moment, but when I have felt the cut of death and grief, it takes me some time, maybe even years in some cases, before these words are

helpful. In moments of deep loss, I think I tend to not look for hope, but sit with the pain. Sometimes, I might use a prayer book and 'go through the motions', not in a disrespectful way, but as a way to bring some assurance or stability to my heart. I recall the painful morning after the death of my father one Easter Day and the birds were singing to the rising sun. My world had stopped, but all the world was going on as if nothing had happened. Going through the motions with a prayer book helped, even if I didn't feel much different.

However, in this story at Bethany, at this moment of utter desperation and loss, comes the unthinkable. Jesus cries out, "Lazarus, Come out." Lazarus will live again. Unthinkable, unimaginable: hope strangely made real. Lazarus is unbound from the grave, and many believed.

For Ezekiel, guided in the spirit to the valley of bones, he is confronted with a vision of death on a proportion beyond comprehension. Ezekiel is asked to speak words of hope and life into a circumstance of utter devastation. In my mind's eye I take myself to the images I described at the start: of the WWII Concentration Camp images, and wonder, could I speak these same words of hope to a vision of such heart-breaking despair? Could I, last summer, after the fires tore through the forests at Grantville, stand and look at the blackened ground, the smouldering trees, the skeleton of the houses lost, the livelihoods destroyed, and speak of the life-giving breath of God?

"Out of my depths I cry to you O LORD. Lord, hear my voice."

These two stories reflect for us, at a micro and macro level, how God might meet us in our grief and despair: and also, how we might be asked to be the bearers of hope in times of despair. In our current circumstances, with a world-wide pandemic, we worry not only for ourselves individually, but also for our Shearwater regional congregations, our all our local towns and communities and the whole of the world. How might we hold hope?

One of the privileges of faith, is prayer. One of the duties of faith is also prayer. And in prayer we may be lead, like Ezekiel, to pray over what seems hopeless and lifeless. In prayer, we might recall the tears of Jesus with Mary and Martha, and their whole community, and we also may allow our tears to be a prayer, as Jesus did. That is tough work as disciples, to stay with the overwhelming images of loss and yet still claim God's life giving breath into each and every circumstance.

"Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

The great encouragement in our psalm today, is that we can bring our heartfelt prayers to God: we can wait upon God in the face of helplessness: we can remain in God's Word, listening for the dawn song of the birds. Let us pray.

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My friend Laura sent me a text message on my mobile phone last night:

IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

AND THE PEOPLE STAYED HOME. AND THEY READ BOOKS, AND LISTENED, AND RESTED and exercised, and made art and played games and learned new ways of being, and were still. And they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. And the people began to think differently.

And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living ignorant, dangerous, mindless, and heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, and the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, and made new choices, and dreamed new images, and created new ways to live and the healed the earth fully, as they had been healed.

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