



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Sunday, March 29, 2020

Scripture Passages: Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:1-45

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Let me tell you a story:

At age eleven he first went to sea with his father. He sailed six voyages with him. Back on land – still a young man, one day, going to visit friends, he was captured – kidnapped really - and press-ganged into naval service by the Royal Navy. At one point he tried to desert and was punished in front of a crew of 350 sailors. In punishment, he received a flogging of eight dozen lashes and was near death.

Following that disgrace and humiliation, He thought about murdering the captain and committing suicide by throwing himself overboard. He recovered, both physically and mentally. But his troubles weren't over – in fact they were just starting. He was transferred to a slave ship bound for West Africa. It carried goods to Africa and traded them for slaves to be shipped to the colonies. And then another calamity: he was left in West Africa with a slave dealer. He was abused and mistreated badly – forgotten by his own people. But early in 1748 he was rescued by a sea captain and returned to England.

During that voyage home, he had a spiritual conversion. The ship was rocked by a severe storm and almost sank. He awoke in the middle of the night and, as the ship filled with water, called out to God. The cargo shifted and stopped up the hole, and the ship drifted to safety. He marked this experience as the beginning of his conversion to Christianity.

He began to read the Bible on that voyage, and by the time he reached Britain, he had become a Christian. The date was the 10th of March 1748, an anniversary he marked for the rest of his life. Although he continued to work in the slave trade, God was working in his heart and head. He later said that his true conversion did not happen until some time later while he was again in west Africa. There, he became ill with a fever and then professed his full belief in Christ, asking God, trusting in God to take control of his destiny. He later said that this was the first time he felt totally at peace with God.

A few years later, he gave up involvement in the slave trade. A few years after that he became a priest in the church of England. He was a man who had been dead at least four times by his own accounting; a man whose life was marked deeply by a hard-won but gut-level, visceral trust in God. And a man who'd been brought back to life because of it. He bore the scars of his deaths in the service of a greater cause – in preaching the Christian faith and working out that faith in trust and justice – in working for the Abolition of the slave trade. He was of course, The Reverend John Newton, and he wrote the iconic hymn Amazing Grace. “I once was lost but now am found. Was blind but now I see, . . .”

What a story of trust in God’s power to bring life out of death – and we have two more to contend with this morning:

We have Ezekiel as he looks out over the great puzzle of bones – a death scene like no other. This is advanced extinction you understand – there are no bodies as such. These are dry bones. All life is gone. So as he looks out over this scene emptied of life, the Lord says, riddle me this Ezekiel: Can these dry bones live?

Ezekiel answers in the way I think many of us would answer that question given the scene: “God only knows.”

And God says to Ezekiel – “prophecy – speak the word of God over these bones.”

And when Ezekiel – in spite of the apparent hopelessness in front of him, trusts the Lord and does so, the Lord raises up those bones and gives them life.

And Lazarus? Well, the same deal really – Jesus arrives to a scene of death and hopelessness and anguish. He visits a family beloved to him: Mary and Martha and Lazarus. But unfortunately Mary and Martha’s little brother is incontrovertibly dead. Really, really dead after four days – St. John wants us to know that. Ancient near eastern custom had it that the spirit of the deceased hovered over the body for three days. Day four it was gone and all life with it.

And of course, we always need to remember – in order to understand the impact of Jesus’ acts – his healings, his miracles, his teachings – that they were all connected to the stories in what we call the Old Testament, but which Jesus and his fellow Jews called the Bible. That’s all there was of course – the Hebrew Bible, the law and the prophets and the wisdom literature and the psalms. So when Jesus shows up to a situation that feels very much like the valley of the shadow of death, and then brings life out of it, the resonances for his disciples, for all the bystanders, onlookers, enemies and authorities alike is pretty profound. They’re making connections all over the place with Ezekiel’s story.

Remember the Lord's words, "And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people." The identification of Jesus with the same Creator God of the valley of dry bones, is purposeful. Only the Creator can bring life from death: from arid, infertile bones OR from a man four days dead – only God can do that. And therefore, the implication of the Gospel Writer, is that Jesus and the Father are one.

And that's the common denominator here - the Lord. Both the fact of God's presence and trust in the Lord.

Notice Ezekiel's weary trust. We read this story - the story of the dry bones - a couple of times each year. And perhaps – as happens with any familiar text – it's lost some of its cultural punch. But it's important to try and remember it. Because we can't fully comprehend the incredible hope in the latter verses of this passage without some attention to why Ezekiel's response is so - resigned.

So before we can see in our mind's eye the wind swirl the bones back together and marvel at the newly formed humans breathing the breath of life again, we have to ask a few questions. Why is that valley full of bones? What caused the visions of death that the community faced? What has brought Ezekiel to the point of near speechlessness and despair?

The fact is, Ezekiel himself was forced into exile and he'd lost everything. We forget the historical trauma that accompanied this exile. We forget that the Babylonians tortured the inhabitants of Jerusalem with siege warfare that lasted almost two years, leading to famine, disease, and despair. They destroyed the city of Jerusalem, razed the temple to the ground, killed many of its inhabitants, and forced the rest to migrate to Babylon. They suffered multiple traumas under the realities of ancient Near Eastern warfare.

If this is sounding similar to the situation of so many displaced people in our own time, well, this is why it's so important to remember these things. Substitute Syria for Jerusalem and suddenly we're listening in a different way.

And while we read Ezekiel 37 as a beautiful passage, we begin to understand in this context, that it is also difficult. It's difficult because it calls the reader to remember, confront, and testify to the devastating events that led to a valley filled with dry bones in the first place. But it is also pregnant with surprise and with the possibility that even in this landscape full of death, a hope for renewed life remains.

So, in a scene that brings to mind the breath of God entering the first human in Genesis 2, the prophet then commands the four winds and the same breath of God enters the bodies that live once more. The miracle of this vision isn't about its theatricality. The true miracle is that it occurs after the community has faced such devastating loss and the finality of death. Ezekiel's trust in God is rewarded with life.

Again, it puts me in mind of Newton's words, "How precious did that grace appear, the hour I first believed."

I rather love it that Ezekiel is presented with a mess and is asked whether there could possibly be life here. I rather love his response: God only knows. Actually, it's "God, only you know." There's a personal response to the Lord who asks a serious and personal question. Ezekiel frankly doesn't have the answer – or the energy.

But the Lord says, trust me and here's why: because if things come to life again after this kind of pretty final, pretty dead death, you can be confident of one thing: and that is that I'm in the middle of that. You can trust that I am the Lord and where I am, life is.

God says, "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.

That's good. Where God is, there is the breath of life – but new life.

And it's certainly something that Jesus fully relies on. Both when he, in the power of God, raises Lazarus and throughout his own experiences in the desolation and loss and death of the cross. It's because he knows profoundly, that the God of Ezekiel will breathe his creative breath into him – the word in Hebrew is Ruach. It's the same word that's used in Genesis in the story of creation. The same breath that moved over the face of the waters in the beginning is the breath that gives life to those dead bones. It's this life, this creative force, this bringing to life again, that Jesus trusts in.

You notice, that Lazarus as he comes out of that tomb, is the same Lazarus – still mortal. He has his grave wrappings on; he presumably will bear the marks of one who has been dead for a serious amount of time. He will presumably have to heal from that experience.

And we all notice – because the Gospel writers very much want us to see this – that Jesus – after the Resurrection – still bears the scars of the ordeal of his crucifixion – even as he's fully alive to eternity: nail marks in his hands and feet, a wound in his side, . . . He is alive, but differently. When Lazarus is raised, Jesus doesn't wipe the experience of death out. Lazarus carries it with him as well as the miracle of a life restored.

I find this important. This is new life that has not forgotten the pain of death, but has incorporated it, folded it into life.

To me this is very important. This is reality, that's how it is isn't it?

You see we all face death at some point; perhaps the finality of the death of someone special in our lives, or the death of hopes and dreams or the ending of important relationships; or the death of our dearest held plans – we’ve had to struggle with a lot of that lately in the disruption that the COVID-19 crisis has caused; the death of the way things were – we get that too – as we continue to stay apart, cease working in social groups, stop seeing family and friends, and even in our enforced togetherness, experience loneliness.

And we do feel dryness: the silence of the valley of dry bones, a feeling of pointlessness – a shut door. And at times, the thought of new life may seem difficult, when what we want is what was.

But our story – the scriptures - tell us that that is precisely where the Lord works - in the dryness and the desolation; in the lifeless quiet of the valley and the darkness of the tomb; and - in the spaces between the broken pieces of our hearts.

These are the places where life is reborn. Where green shoots begin to take root and grow. We bear the scars of the death of what was, but we do live again – trusting in God for that breath of life and re-creation. In Christ, death does not mean finality – life can come from death.

However, let me draw your attention to something else: life can come from death BUT it’s a changed life. It’s not the same as it was before. God’s work in the midst of death is life-giving – but it will bring with it change. But God’s work in our lives has never left us unchanged. But neither does the Lord leave us alone in that change. God is there, leading us, guiding us.

As Newton wrote, of his own experience: “Through many dangers, toils and snares, I have already come; ‘Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and Grace will lead me home.”

So that is what I want you to pray on this week. How is God - even in the midst of the difficulty of this present time at work in your life – in our parishes – in our diocese - bringing life out of death – and the promise of change and new life out of dry bones?

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