

Questions of Life and Death
Can these bones live?

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, March 22, 2020.

Psalm 23
Ezekiel 37:1-14

Ever since March 11, when the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus a pandemic, I have felt like I just woke up in a "Twilight Zone" episode or a global disaster movie. Those are the only touchstones I have with which to compare our present reality. Health care workers in hazmat suits, businesses shuttered, schools closed, public events cancelled, people staying home, infectious disease researchers desperately trying to develop a treatment and a vaccine, public officials around the world trying to manage a global public health crisis. All of these images that I have generally associated with fictional television shows and movies are now part of our real, everyday lives! The scenes of screenplays have become our reality. We are living them out in real time.

Our lives have been profoundly disrupted by the coronavirus pandemic and in a very short amount of time. The situation changes by the day, and it's hard to keep up. We are stressed out, anxious, and afraid. Cases of infection are rising and the death toll is mounting. At the same time, a growing number of people are being hurt economically as the economy slows, businesses shut down, employees are laid off, and incomes are diminished or disappear altogether. We all face an uncertain future.

Some are calling this "the new normal," because it may be several weeks, or even months, before the coronavirus pandemic is behind us. But it isn't normal. It is anything but normal. None of us have experienced anything like this before. Most of us may be staying at home, but we don't feel "at home." Our surroundings may be familiar, but the reality of our lives is strangely unfamiliar. We have an unsettling feeling about it all. Something just isn't right. It is as though we suddenly found ourselves in a state of exile, in a strange and foreign place in our lives, without ever leaving our homes.

The reading from Ezekiel is addressed to a people in exile. The priest turned prophet is speaking to the Jews who had been forced into exile in Babylon. They had been rounded up and taken prisoner by a foreign army, uprooted from their homes in Judah, torn away from everything familiar, and forced to travel to a strange and foreign land, where they were being held captive against their will.

We have not been taken from our homes by a foreign army. In that sense, we are not in exile. But we are under occupation, our daily movements severely constrained and our economic activity disrupted by the widespread and unwelcome presence of an enemy that is invisible to the naked eye – COVID-19.

The exiles in captivity in Babylon longed to return home to Jerusalem. But as year after year went by, they began to lose hope of ever returning. Living in a strange land with a foreign culture, cut off from the land God had given them, they felt as though they had died inside. "Our bones are dried up," they said, "and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Here, they were drawing on the Hebrew proverb that says: "A cheerful heart

is a good medicine, but a downcast spirit dries up the bones." Their bones were all dried up. There was no spirit left in them.

We are nowhere near the point of losing hope in the face of the coronavirus pandemic. Our spirits remain high. Our bones are not yet dried up. But it's been less than two weeks since the WHO's declaration. We don't know how long the pandemic will last. We don't know how long our lives will be disrupted. We don't know how many people will become infected. And we don't know how many will die. We may be just at the beginning of what could be a long haul as the pandemic runs its course.

In the midst of the exiles' despair, God gives Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones. And God asks Ezekiel: "Mortal, can these bones live?" The obvious answer is "No, of course not!" But Ezekiel differs to God: "O Lord God, you know." God tells Ezekiel to "prophesy 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." Ezekiel did as God commanded, and "suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together." Sinews appeared. Flesh came upon them and skin covered them, "but there was no breath in them."

And then God said to Ezekiel: "Prophesy 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." Again, Ezekiel did as God commanded, "and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

It was a vision of hope for the Jews living in exile. Even in exile, they were still God's people. God had not forgotten them. God had not abandoned them. God would bring them back to the land of Israel. "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live," God said, "and I will place you on your own soil." Through Ezekiel's vision, God was promising new life to the nation of Israel. They would not remain in exile forever. They would be restored.

And indeed, after nearly sixty years, God's promise was fulfilled. In 539 B.C.E., Babylon fell to the Persians, and Cyrus, the Persian emperor, finally gave the Jews living in exile in Babylon permission to return to Jerusalem.

Can a valley of dry bones live again? Of course not! Can the dead be raised from the grave? Absurd, we say! But not with God. For with God, all things are possible. Where there is death and despair, God promises new life and hope. It was God's promise to the Israelites in exile. It was God's promise to the first-century followers of Jesus. And it is God's promise to us today.

I believe that the vast majority of us will survive this global health crisis. I have faith and confidence that together we will get through this. Though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, we shall fear no evil; for God is with us; God's rod and staff, they comfort us.

Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones, brings to my mind other images of death and destruction. When an entire California town is burned to the ground by a wildfire, I see a valley of dry bones. When a Pacific coastal area is destroyed by a tidal wave, I see a valley

of dry bones. When a mid-western community is leveled by a tornado, I see a valley of dry bones. When a city is reduced to rubble by an earthquake, I see a valley of dry bones.

Again and again, communities face enormous devastation and upheaval. The survivors, like the Jewish exiles in Babylon, wonder how they will ever go on. How will their community ever recover? And somehow, little by little, bit by bit, they do, eventually, recover. They find a way where there is no way, and they rebuild from the ground up.

When the health of the whole human family is threatened by the spread of a dangerous virus, I see a valley of dry bones. Ezekiel's vision offers hope for peoples and nations around the world whose lives are being shattered by dislocation, disease, and death. Even in the midst of this global pandemic, we are still God's people. God has not forgotten us. God has not abandoned us. "I will put my spirit within you," God says, "and you shall live." God is here with us, watching over us, holding out the promise of new life and hope. The coronavirus pandemic will not last forever. In the end humankind will prevail and will be restored.

We worship a God of transformation -- a God who brings life out of death and hope out of despair. We worship a God of love -- a God who loves us into being and who will love us always no matter what. We worship a God of faithfulness -- a God who is present with us now and who will remain with us always. And for that we give God our thanks and praise. Amen.

MARCH 22, 2020

First Reading: Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want. The LORD makes me lie down in green pastures and leads me beside still waters. You restore my soul, O LORD, and guide me along right pathways for your name's sake. Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, and my cup is running over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

(Book of Common Worship)

Second Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD was upon me, and brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And God led me round among them; and there were very many upon the valley; and they were very dry. And God said to me, "O mortal, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Again God said to me, "Prophesy 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. And I will lay sinews upon 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 was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise and a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And as I looked, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then God said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, O 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." So I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great host.

Then God said to me, "O mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you home into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken, and I have done it, say the LORD." *(An Inclusive-Language Lectionary)*