**Dry Bones Infused with Hope**

**Advent II December 10, 2017**

**Narrative Lectionary**

Ezekiel 37: 1-14 Russell Mitchell-Walker

A couple of years ago Tyler, our oldest who is now 26, who has lived with addictions since his teen years, was in a bad period of spiraling downward. He had finished a carpentry program at the Skills and Trades school program just as the market downturn began as a result of oil price increases. Many carpenters had been laid off so there was no work in the field and not much of anything else to find. He got depressed and fell back into the patterns of addiction which included dealing drugs. It became a very difficult time of letting go as there was nothing we could do but pray. We were praying that he hit bottom and survive. These times of despair and pain, can feel desolate and death-dealing, like a pile of dry bones.

The people of Israel were in a period of dry bones. They had been living in exile and recently learned of the destruction of their Temple. Life seemed hopeless with no possibility in sight for returning home to Jerusalem. It is in this context that Ezekiel has his vision of the valley of dry bones. The bones symbolizing the hopelessness of the Israelite situation. But into this hopelessness, God brings the bones together and breathes new life into the death of the valley. It is a message of hope that not only will the Israelites life improve, but that they will also be going home. Even in the depth of despair, and death dealing circumstances, God can bring hope and breathe new life into these experiences.

Where do you see dry bones in our community? An area that comes to mind for me, is the Sunday School program and the small numbers of children and families in worship on a regular basis. Is the concept of Sunday school a dead one? The traditional concept doesn’t seem to fit for many of our families anymore. It may seem like we don’t have many families as part of our community and it can feel like that when we only have a few children or no children on a Sunday morning. However, if you pay attention, you will note that we rarely have the same families each week, and over a month we may have up to ten different families or young children join us. So the question is how do we work to offer faith formation within this kind of reality? While some lament the lack of children, others are lamenting the diminishing financial resources we have for this ministry. We used to pay Sunday school teachers and have a paid family minister. We no longer support a second ministry staff in our budget and while we still have some money budgeted for Sunday school teachers, it is decreasing. We need more financial support to offer the support needed for our children’s ministry. What are the hopes for new life in this area? Do we need to look at offering this ministry outside of Sunday morning?

While our family dinners was a hope for this, there has not been very many families attending regularly. It has been largely successful for adults looking for an inexpensive meal and community so it is meeting a need and we will continue to work with this. With regard to families, I wonder if another program at a different time would work. The question is, will there be a time that they could or would come? I’ve wondered about exploring the program called Messy Church, where families come together for a themed time of learning and creativity, that comes together in a collective worship experience. It can begin or end with a meal.

Maybe we need to see our adult children who grew up in the church and are peripheral to it now, as a missional field. Could we have conversations with them about what they might look for from the church if anything? Are there programs or ministry that we could offer that would be helpful to them? Think outside of Sunday morning, which doesn’t seem to draw too many of them. What could we learn from each other if we had these conversations? I invite you to explore and engage in this over the Christmas season, as we get together as families. God working through us and our community can bring hope and breathe new life to our children and family ministries. It may take work and patience but it can happen.

About a year an a half ago, we received a call from Tyler that he had hit bottom and needed help. He was ready to turn his life around. The dry bones were being brought back together. He wanted to come back home and needed help moving his stuff out of the apartment he was evicted from – his roommates had been arrested and contrary to what they told him, the rent was not all paid up. On one of the trips to our place, Tyler was riding with Brian and told him, with tears in his eyes, how grateful he was that we loved him unconditionally. We had always communicated that and were glad it had sunk in. New life was breathed into the dry bones. Hope infused into what seemed a hopeless situation. He is now living with his girlfriend who had encouraged him through this time, has a steady job and they are fostering her 11 year old brother. He is hoping to still get a job in construction to take advantage of his carpentry training.

Regardless of the challenges we face in life, in church, in community, we are not alone. God is with us in and through others and can find ways to infuse hope into our situations of hopelessness. Hope can lead to bringing peace into a reality that can make it hard to find peace. On this second Sunday of Advent, whose theme is peace, we celebrate the peace we experience in Christ, in the unexpected ways we find hope and peace in the love and grace of others, which is God in us. May we hold on to that hope, that peace, when life is challenging, when we feel like we are in a pile of dry bones, knowing that we can experience the infusion of God’s hope and new life. This is the message of this season of waiting and watching. Sometimes the waiting is painful but there can be rewards of hope and peace at the other end. For that we give thanks.