

Sermon Notes – May 23, 2021

(Ezekiel 37:1-14 – with Guest Pastor, Rev. Sandi Hood)

Will you pray with me? Merciful and Loving God, I pray that the meditations of our hearts and the words of my mouth might glorify you -- that the words might not be so much my words, but your words. Give us ears to listen, Lord. Amen.

Well, “Happy Birthday, Church!” I say this because today is Pentecost Sunday and traditionally, we celebrate “the birth of the church” in a passage found in Acts. While Acts is most often the chosen passage for this Sunday’s lectionary, there are also other lectionary texts that underscore the wonderful power of the Holy Spirit. We know Jesus certainly spent some time reassuring his disciples that The Spirit would be with them, as a comforter and an advocate, when he went to be with his heavenly father. And, then there’s the prophet, Ezekiel. Prior to seminary, I never spent much time in the book of Ezekiel. If you know much about him, his actions seemed a little “out there,” if you know what I mean. But, as I studied and I learned more about the Biblical context and the history, I realized that Ezekiel was desperate. He was desperate to reach the people whom he loved.

Just a little historical background: **Around 6 century B.C.E., Israel was overthrown by the Babylonians, and many were taken over, taken away from their homeland, and exiled in Babylon.** *Not only were many of the Israelites taken captive, but, ten years later, the Babylonians went back to finish the job.* They destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and stole all of the treasures inside. Only the poorest and the powerless remained. It was catastrophic!

What followed (for Ezekiel) were wild and unforgettable visions revealed to him by God -- all messages for the people that were taken away – messages of hope. ***Yes, even in catastrophes of epic proportion, messages that God still is the business of giving back life anew.*** I dare say that none of us here in this room – I hope not anyway – have seen, up close and personally, a valley filled with humanity’s dry bones. I am

thankful for that. Are any of you familiar with the spiritual, “Dem Bones”? As a child, I loved singing, “Dem Bones,” written by the writer James Weldon Johnson and his brother Jay Rosomond Johnson in the 1920s. It ended with the refrain, “Now hear the word of the Lord.” It’s a lively song and I remember dancing around in Sunday School (as a kid) as I imagined the scene of the bones coming back together to walk and interact with each other. I only found out years later that Mr. Johnson was also an early civil rights activist. He also wrote the lyrics to the Black National Anthem, “Lift Every Voice and Sing.” That’s another song of connectedness and hope – an anthem that continues to inspire our national landscape today.

Now, as an adult, I guess the closest thing that I could relate to Ezekiel’s visions, is my memory of watching the animated movie, “The Lion King,” over and over again with my children when they were young. In the film, there’s a scene where little Simba finds himself lost in the elephant graveyard, surrounding by lots and lots of scattered bones. Bones scattered as far as the eye can see -- desolate, dark, and daunting. I imagine that is probably what Ezekiel must have felt when God gave him the vision of the valley of the dry bones – a literal picture of death right before his eyes.

In her book, “Help, Thanks, Wow,” author Ann Lemont wrote, “When nothing new can get in, that’s death.” The exiled Israelites in Babylon had long reached a point where nothing new could get in. It was a weird time. They had no point in reference to know what to do next. They felt dead. They were truly “socially distanced.” They were cut off from friends and loved ones; they were isolated and living in a foreign land; they were even unable to worship in the temple that they loved, that was now in crumbles. It was just too much. ***Their despair resulted in physical, social, and sadly, even spiritual death.*** For the Israelites, God was nowhere to be found.

But, God was still there and God came to them, like God always does.

As I eluded to you earlier, we have seen the spirit before. God’s very breath brought life in Genesis 2, when God formed human kind from

dust and breathed into the nostrils of Adam. The Spirit of God comes again on the day of Pentecost as a rushing of wind creating new life with God's church. Over and over again, we see this in scripture. I've even seen this in my own life when I thought there was no hope - that all was lost. ***Then God reminds me that he is in the life-giving business.*** But, you know, let's be frank here, this can be really easy to forget when we find ourselves scared and discouraged. Does this sound familiar?

The news is terrible and yet, I can't seem to make myself turn it off. It doesn't make me feel good, but I can't turn away from it because it's just so compelling. Or my friend's church did not meet for a month and they wondered will there even be a church to go back to when this is all over? Or I've been a care-giver for so long, I don't even know who I am anymore, and does anybody even care?

Mortal. Can these bones live? My friends, can our bones live?

I believe that many of us are still in the throes of some pretty deep grief because of the historical events we have experienced these past fifteen months - collectively and individually. Indeed, many of us witnessed or experienced crisis like we have never known before. There may be some of you here that got sick. Some of you may have lost your livelihood. Others of you may be grieving the death of a friend or a loved one. I, personally, have lost several people that I love to COVID.

In my ministry, in my work at Hospice, I've learned that there can be a lot of healing with the support of community. Sometimes that takes the form of what we call a "support group," where people come together to heal, share, and adjust to the new life in which they find themselves. But, I think it can be very similar in what we find in the faith community - in the church. We need one another to heal, don't we? ... And to help others heal by offering and receiving support. We need one another to live by sharing our stories, by singing our praises, by seeking our Jesus to raise us up so that the Spirit of God can breathe new life into our dry, weary bones. We need that Spirit of new life in our families, our church, our town, and into our world. ***We need the Spirit of God.*** And, yes, even

people of faith can sometimes be those petrified, parched, dry bones in the valley. Remember, bones can't function on their own. Brittle, cracked bones even look helpless. Sometimes, we can become so polarized, so fractured, and so exhausted that before we know it, all semblance of life inside us withers away. We find ourselves a mess of bits and pieces scattered here and beyond with no semblance of our former selves -- and certainly no indication of what our purpose was to begin with. We're so tired that we can't even remember who we were. But, friends, I don't think that our recent past has the market cornered on crisis and catastrophe. Certainly throughout scripture, we see crisis and catastrophe and God's redeeming through that. *But, have you ever experienced times when you felt that there was no hope? Have there been times when you felt that you have lost your way? Or felt that something inside had died within you? ... I think that we all have. Please don't give up. Amazing things can happen when the breath, the Spirit, the wind, God's very presence, comes and brings life abundantly.*

In the UCC, there's a saying: "Don't place a period where God has placed a comma." Some of you may have seen these billboards, print ads, or bookmarks with a question: "Why the comma?" ... Because God is still speaking... because of the hope we have in God... because a comma says, "there is more left to come." The last time I checked, God was in the resurrection-business.

In her book, "Accidental Saints," Nadia Bolts Webber writes that one night per year, the church she founded housed for all sinners and saints sets aside time to share personal stories of their faith so that they can remember who they are. She recalls that one year, one of her church members wanted to speak. He was very handsome and seemed to have a very successful business background. From all appearances, he never seemed to have any struggles. (*Do you know people like that - who just seem to be perfect?*) But, he wanted to read the valley of the dry bones from Ezekiel. So, Steven stood up and he went to the lectern with a single sheet of paper in his hand. He told his church that he felt emotionally dead - that nothing seemed to make a difference. He named all the many things he had tried on his friends' suggestions or even on

the world's advice to make his depression lighten, but nothing seemed to make a difference. Then he said, "But then I remember the valley of the dry bones." In the valley, God is talking to the prophet, Ezekiel and he guides him into something resembling a mass open grave. It's a valley connected from one end to the next with nothing but humanity to its core - dry bones. In this valley, there is absolutely no sign of life. God tells Ezekiel to cry out. "Cry out to those dry bones. Cry out to God's children. Tell them to rise. Tell them to listen to God and rise" - and they listened. God lifts them up, puts them back together, breathes into them, and they breathe anew. God fills them with the Spirit. Where there was once death, hopelessness, and despair, there is new life. Steven said, "In hearing that, for me, there is life and there is hope, and that is sufficient."

Sometimes healing comes in hearing the dry bones of others and their stories. They remind us of the closeness of God. But, at other times, we find healing when we don't waste our pain, don't we? ... When we share our stories of how we found life again, how we experience resurrection here on this side of the earth, to the very breath and Spirit of God. ***God calls out to us today, "Mortal. Trinity. My friends, my children, get up and live. Live and dance."***

May you, as Trinity Reformed Church and may we, as fellow brothers and sisters, always have the faith and the courage to cry out, "Live" to the dry bones of this world - to the dry bones of the people we come into contact with - as well as the dry bones that dwell inside each one of us. Amen.