

“Reunited, Unbound”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
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Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

Nobody expected this to happen. They knew, in a very vague sort of way, that it was possible, but it was all too easy to ignore the warnings of the prophets who predicted what was coming. So when the Babylonians marched into Jerusalem in 587 B.C., there was a sense of surprise and shock that magnified the horror people felt.

They were under no delusions. It wouldn’t be business as usual anymore. Some would be left behind to tend the fields and guard the flocks, slave labor working to make profit for their conquerors, but many would be taken away from home, from the Promised Land to exile in a foreign land, without freedom, powerless against their new overlords. And no one knew, no one had a clue, how long it might last: a year, a lifetime, forever?

We can scarcely imagine their despair, though we’re certainly in a better position now than we were just a few months ago. We saw what was happening in China and then Italy and Iran, but that could never happen here, and even if it did, very few anticipated the consequences, the radical steps that would need to be taken to slow the spread and save lives. We’ve had to coin new vocabulary, like social distancing, and learn new practices, like how to worship facing a camera or watching a screen.

Yes, I think the current crisis gives us a keener appreciation for how our ancestors in the faith felt 26 centuries ago. They got taken away from home. We’re stuck in ours. They lost everything. We’ve lost quite a bit already, and who knows how much more? They didn’t know how long it would go on, neither do we, and that might be the most maddening part of it all. But

the crisis caused them to take their faith more seriously, because that's all they really had left to lean on, and I believe that the same holds true for us today.

The ancient Israelites got started renewing their faith by writing down the words of those prophets they'd ignored, prophets like Ezekiel. It helped them make sense of things, to see with the benefit of hindsight how this had come to be. It also offered them hope, because no true prophet spews nothing but gloom and doom. No, the real deal always offers a glimpse of a better future, of new possibilities being brought forth by God for when the time is ripe, and that's what we heard earlier from Ezekiel.

In a vision, God led Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones, the aftermath of a lost battle where the defeat had been so complete the fallen didn't receive a proper burial. It's a nightmare of an image, full of humiliation and indignity. These had once been proud men, courageous, but now nothing was left but desiccated, desecrated bones.

Then God spoke to Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel answered, "O Lord God, you know," and God commanded him, "Prophesy to these bones." And as the word of God passed through Ezekiel, that creative word caused a rattling sound. If you had a skeleton in a classroom growing up and ever gave it a good shake, you know that eerie sound, and the bones came together, and layer upon layer of flesh was added, bringing together what had been separated and making the bodies whole once more, until finally God called upon Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath – to summon from the four corners of the earth that power of life first breathed into Adam. "And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude."

This vision was a promise that those who had been separated would be reunited. People who felt torn apart would be put back together again, piece by piece, and reanimated by the

breath of God. For those of us suffering from separation, from being held apart from those we love, this vision offers great comfort. For those of us disassembled by the sharp claws of fear, of an economy teetering on the edge, this vision bolsters our faith.

However, there was more to the exile than just separation. These people were bound, too; bound to serve without gain; sometimes, literally bound with rope or chain, somewhat similar to Lazarus when he inched his way out of the tomb wrapped up in his grave clothes. What a terrible combination, to be both separated and bound at the same time. And right now, a lot of us feel bound in one way or another.

The same God who brings back together what has been separated is the God who unleashes the bound. We worship a God who takes death and turns it into life. We worship a God who takes disappointment and transforms it into a fresh vision of how our lives and our world can be. We worship a God who calms our fears and brings us peace, even when our fears are fully justified.

Our job, like our Israelite ancestors, is to lean on our faith, to make the Psalmist's prayer our own. "I wait for the Lord; my soul waits from him; in his word is my hope. My soul waits for the Lord; more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning." Whatever we might lose, and we'll all lose something to this dreadful virus, God stands ready, eager to put things back together again. It might not be as it was before, and we'll rightly grieve what's taken from us, but we won't be left bereft, "for with the Lord there is mercy." Amen.