

“Can These Bones Live?”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia via Facebook Live

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Lent 5

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Ezekiel 37:1-14

John 11:1-45

Both of our scriptures today deal with the reality of death: Ezekiel, in witnessing a valley of dry bones, bones that represent the death of a community forced to live in exile; John, in the story of Jesus’ dear friend Lazarus, brother to Mary and Martha, who has died. I take part in a few clergy groups, and we have been an incredible support to one another-- virtually-- in this time of pandemic. At the beginning of the week, one of my clergy colleagues wondered among us if these two passages and their talk about death feel too close to home, too traumatizing in times such as these. Of course there was a flood of responses to this question; the way I see it, there is some relief I feel in the Bible going into the darkest shadows of our fears; for we know that if we end up in those shadows in real life, at least someone else has already explored the contours of it before us and shown us the way out or through.

We are getting closer to Holy Week; next Sunday will be Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem with the Palm Sunday parade, but after that the shadow of the cross will loom larger and larger as we remember Jesus’ betrayal, his trial, his crucifixion, his death, and his burial. The scriptures tell us, before we can move to Easter, we must first acknowledge the reality and fear of death. I think we are all doing that right now, as we shelter-in-place to protect the vulnerable among us, and also our health care workers, from severe sickness and even death. We cannot deny that reality; this is not the time for social gatherings, and it is not even the time we should talk about reopening our churches or reopening the country for Easter. On the TV show Morning Joe last week, The Rev. Al Sharpton announced, “You cannot get to Easter Sunday without first going through the crucifixion on Friday. A crucifixion precedes the resurrection... and we have not even got up Calvary’s mountain yet to the crucifixion, we just have the cross on our back,”

The hand of the Lord came upon Ezekiel, brought him out by the spirit of the Lord and set him down in the middle of a valley. It was full of bones. Here is how the reading from the Prophets begins. You should know that Ezekiel prophesied in the 6th century BCE, to the Judeans who had been exiled to Babylon from their home, their temple,

and-- some felt-- their God. Beloved leaders had died. Ezekiel spoke to them as they wrestled with questions like “Does our suffering have a purpose?” “Has God abandoned us?” and “What will be left when this tragedy is over?”

To get to the heart of these questions, God showed Ezekiel a vision, in a valley of dry bones.

When I think of a valley, I think of the field in Overpeck Park-- the place where last weekend and the weekend before that I brought my family to recreate. I was thinking that with our limits on movements, my sermon illustrations would be limited to something I noticed or saw in Overpeck Park. But now, even those sermon illustrations won't be available, because our local government has closed this and other parks, understandably because people just were not gathering at a safe distance there.

When I think of God telling Ezekiel, Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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"-- I wonder, like many of you, how can this be a *safe* breath? I had food delivered last week, and it arrived in the pouring rain, so the hardworking deliveryman did not leave it on my doorstep; instead, he motioned as if to hand it to me. Caught off guard, since I was expecting drop-off delivery, I was careful to grab the bag at the base, rather than from the handles he was holding. But to do so I had to bend forward a little to receive the bag, and in that moment my face came near to him and while I could have imagined it, I am pretty sure I felt the wind of his breath wisp across my face. The deliveryman was trying to be kind to me, but his offering-- it terrified me.

My sister Alice sent me a helpful meme last week of appropriate hymn selections for this time of pandemic. Out of the question is “Breathe on Me Breath Of God,” “Just a Closer Walk with Thee,” and “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.” Good hymn choices for these times include “Wash O God Your Sons and Daughters,” “I Come to the Garden Alone” and “Jesus Walked this Lonesome Valley.”

But God's breath causes life; it doesn't end life. In Genesis, we are told that God gathered a handful of dirt and fashioned a human out of it, and then pressed God's mouth upon this dirt and pushed God's breath into it, so that he became human and had spirit and had life.

The Hebrew word for breath-- Ruah-- is also the word for Spirit, and also the word for wind. Ingrid Brennen has been posting a video reading of the Hebrew scriptures for the

past two weeks. Last night she shared a video of this scripture from Ezekiel, taken on a sunny day in Overpeck Park-- must have been before it got shut down. The river reeds performed the role of the bones in her video, and as she read of the prophecy connecting the dry bones to one another, causing muscle and flesh to grow upon them, it was as if the reeds stood taller. When the breath came to the bones in Ingrid's telling, the reeds in her video danced as the wind breezed through them. Though there was not a single person in the video, I felt like nature was occupying the space left empty by the people who weren't there, but in ways that pointed to our hopeful future there, and everywhere.

The gospel story also goes into the grim reality of death-- so grim, in this case, that Lazarus' sister Martha warns Jesus about opening the tomb, because there is a stench in there since Lazarus had already dead for 4 days. In their grief, Mary and Martha each said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been there my brother would not have died." Have you noticed how common it is, in the rawness of our grief, to grab at other emotions, such as anger, resentment, or blame? I think about families living in close quarters, and how hard they are trying to hold it all together. I know that on Friday I lost it and got angry with my family, and in my head and even verbally I started to blame them for things that just weren't really theirs. But I realize that behind that anger, I knew I was just feeling fearful and deeply sad. I had to spend some time on my bed, soaking my pillow as I cried into it. But I tell you, after that I felt cleansed. I felt so much better, and ready to engage again.

Jesus witnessed Mary and Martha's grief, and it *did* something to him. The scriptures say that when Jesus saw them weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and he was deeply moved. And then, Jesus does something powerful. ***He wept, too.***

I wonder if being moved to tears changed Jesus from speaking about a spiritual new life, to *actually calling forth physical life from one who had been dead*. I wonder if my tears could move Jesus like that.

I don't think that Jesus will be going into hospital morgues at Englewood, Holy Name, or Hackensack and *physically* resurrect those who have died there from the coronavirus. However, I do believe that Jesus can step into the grief of that space, of that situation, and weep with us. And when Jesus' tears mingle with our own, they form a living water, waters that extend to and beyond our baptism, and bring us to a place where we might live again. And as our sighs are heavy with grief, I trust that the Spirit is interceding, giving us the breath we need, and maybe even providing the air needed for people on ventilators, even those sharing ventilators as they are doing in New York City.

It will be a while before we can unbind one another from the clothing of death. We are living through a time of trauma, and we do not yet know how it will shape us-- though Angie Chung and her colleagues are already being thoughtful in thinking of how their professions as academics can give sage meaning to this point of history. But there *will* be the day when we remove the wrappings of fear. There will be the day when we remove the wrappings of despair. There will be the day when we remove the wrappings of isolation and loneliness, and be joined again with the people we love.

Until that time, let us walk with one another and with God. One thing I understand about the prophecy in Ezekiel, is that it is not given for one individual person, but for the community of a whole. It is not about the resurrection of one body, but of the community formed by the people of God. And while the story of Lazarus is one of a single human being resurrected, this miracle does not happen in isolation. It happens when Jesus joins with grieving Mary and Martha, his disciples, and a gathering of onlookers. While we cannot safely gather in one physical space, we must still gather, as we are doing online right now in church. Do not be fooled: connecting on social media is true connection. Making phone calls is true connection. It may not be everything we long for, but do not doubt the Spirit's power to send its winds through our vast networks to perform miracles of healing of the hurting body and soul. You may want to limit your reading of the news to once a day, but try to increase your phone calls, encouraging texts, and virtual playdates to many times a day. We have to be in isolation right now, but we cannot survive these times alone. We can carry each other through this valley of dry bones, until that day when God turns bones to flesh and fills flesh with breath and we can all dance together in our promised tomorrow.