

“An Advent Message of Peace”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 5, 2021

2nd Sunday of Advent

Psalm 85:1-13

Rev. John Wahl

Ezekiel 37:1-14

“Prophecy over these bones...prophecy to the breath...this is what the Lord says.” (v. 4, 9, 14)

As we have approached and now stepped into this season of Advent – a time of waiting and anticipation – we have been looking to the words and experiences of the ancient prophets as a guide to our preparations for the sure and certain coming of the Lord. These prophets of the Old Testament – namely Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel – lived in the days leading up to and during the Exile: a time of military defeat, dislocation, and trauma.

The book of Ezekiel centers on the oracles of a former priest of Jerusalem who has been carried off to Babylon; cut off from his home country of Israel: its temple and its capital city now destroyed. The prophet understands this utter disaster not as the unfortunate result of Babylon’s territorial expansion. For, since nothing can happen unless God allows it, Ezekiel believes that the Israelite people and their leaders brought this devastation upon themselves through their disobedience to God.

To Ezekiel’s original audience, the description of a valley strewn with dry bones would have called to mind images of a battlefield. As in other times throughout history, when an army was defeated, the victor would often leave the corpses unburied, stripping the bodies of valuables and leaving the flesh for vultures to eat. In time, the bones are bleached by the sun; they become brittle and dry.

God brings Ezekiel to this valley of very many and very dry bones, and asks him, “Can these bones live again?” The obvious answer would be, *not a chance!* Ezekiel does not answer that way. He, instead, says, “Lord God, only you know;” a markedly ambiguous response that could mean, *you know better than I*, or, *it’s your call, not mine.*¹

¹ John Holbert, “We Rattling Bones”

God presses past this initial non-answer and tells the human what he is to say. “Prophecy over these bones,” Ezekiel is instructed; not from a comfortable distance, but right there among them. The message for the bones is not one of tentative possibilities; this is a proclamation for a sure and certain future: “you will live again...you will know that I am Lord.” (v. 5, 6)

And so, Ezekiel tells us, he prophesied. Even though there was nobody alive or around to hear him, he spoke the words aloud as instructed. Right away, his prophecy came about: in the silence, a great rattling was heard, the scattered bones came together, the dry bones grew sinews and flesh and were covered in skin.

This was the first step; the bodies had been reconstituted, but they were not yet alive. So, God instructed Ezekiel to prophesy again, this time to the breath, which is also the spirit and the wind. In Hebrew, the same word is used for all three. And so, just as in the creation story from Genesis – where God formed humankind and breathed life into them – the fallen rise to their feet and to new life, forming a vast company; but no longer an army: for there is no enemy to confront.

As we near the end of this calendar year, we look out on the places in our world that lay waiting for an infusion of breath, wind, and spirit. We are still living in a global pandemic; we see wildfires and oil spills, migration crises and border struggles, school shootings and supply shortages. There are ongoing social and personal upheavals in our neighborhoods and across the globe. The vibrancy of sustained life eludes us daily.

When we look out across the valley of dry bones that is our landscape today, it would be understandable if we, like Ezekiel, were uncertain about whether there is any hope for renewed life. The people of the prophet’s devastated community struggled to embody that hope, as have all of us who are heirs to the tradition. But, as this vision shows, God continues to call people to speak out: to prophesy that what appears dry can come to life; that what is disconnected can re-gather; that what has neither breath nor spirit can once again live.²

The exiles, according to the Lord, had been saying that their bones were all dried up; that, as a result of being cut off from their city and Temple, they had no reason for hope. The word of God that Ezekiel is called to speak reveals that this will not always be so; that the wind of the Spirit will again blow and new breath will enter into their re-created bodies. Those forced from home will be able to return; those struck down by war will now experience peace.

²Lisa Thompson from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Ezekiel is in the unique position of being both an exile (one who has experienced loss) and a prophet (who is called to proclaim hope). As people of faith in a disrupted world, we also inhabit this dual role: we are called to proclaim the hope of new life that we may not yet be able to describe or even imagine. Still, we have an advantage: we have already seen it happen. In Christ, God came among us, to be with us, and show us that new life can arise from the dead. We are witnesses that the grave can be opened; that death will not have the final say.

It is the role of the church to stand in the valley of dry bones – in the midst of destruction and death surrounding us – and to speak a prophetic message of peace. These days, we continue to hear the ancient words of God, who asked, “Can these bones live?” Our answer must move beyond Ezekiel, who said, “Lord God, only you know,” because, we now also know. The dry bones can live again, and we have been called to aid God in their regeneration to a more vital humanity.

Thus, the church and its people must be partners with God in proclaiming this message of peace. We do this by accompanying people walking through their own dark valleys; by helping to feed and clothe, to heal and educate, to promote justice and reconciliation. Like Ezekiel, we are called to prophesy to God’s grace even when we aren’t sure anyone is watching or listening.

That is why we come to gather at the Lord’s Table. We do it not for show; not because it will attract people to or convince them of God’s love. We come in order to proclaim that God is the one who embodies us, who gathers the scattered and the lost and makes us whole; God is the one who breathes life into us and allows us to imagine a new life and a restored humanity. When we eat of the body of Christ, we are reminded of how Jesus’ own body was resurrected to new life; when we drink of the cup, we know that it is through sharing that we are truly filled.

God is the one who created us and gave us life; and God, in Christ, re-animates us as the church, the body of Christ: called to proclaim God’s eternal love for the world. The initiative might come from God, but the voice that brings the spirit of life back to the dry bones is that of the prophet, who could barely imagine such a thing was possible; only God knows.³

And yet, divine agency and human response are – here, as they are throughout God’s story – interwoven. We don’t have to pretend that there aren’t dry bones scattered around us. We don’t need to know the surgical secrets for bringing about new life. Only God knows; but we speak the words anyway. And God will bring even the very dry bones back to life. All thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*