

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Fifth Sunday in Lent • March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14 • Psalm 130 • Romans 8:6-11 • John 11:1-45

It's probably an understatement to say that the last few weeks have been unusual. In many of my conversations with you, I've heard the same word over and over again: weird. When you watch movies about pandemics, they're full of action packed, dramatic events, but most of us are experiencing this not as an event but as a void. Part of that is because to be safe as a community, we have to be separate. Which feels, to use your word, weird. Usually, when we experience some kind of traumatic event like a terrorist attack or a shooting or a fire, we come together. We have vigils. We have memorials. We have town halls. We don't know quite what to do, but we understand that coming together is a good start. And we can figure it out from there.

So it's strange to have that outlet taken away from us. Sometimes that plays out in rather silly ways. You run into someone you know, and you immediately try to measure six feet of distance in your head. Just the other night, Anna and I went to buy groceries and had to figure out which line on the floor we were supposed to stand on when. But sometimes this emerges in more serious ways. Maybe you have a partner or a family member in a long-term care facility and you can't see them for weeks or months. Maybe you saw some pictures from Washington state of people waving to their loved ones through glass.

That experience of separation is what today's reading from Ezekiel is all about. Ezekiel was written around the sixth century BC by a prophet concerned with the exile of the Israelites. And in today's reading, God walks the prophet out into a valley and it is full of bones. These bones are the people of Israel who have been deported from their home, separated from their loved ones, and sent into exile. The imagery of bones is important for two reasons. One, it's a way of making clear that these people have been dead for a long time. These are not people who happened to die five minutes ago. And two, more important, the bones are separated from each other. The separation that these people have from their home is so deep it goes into their very bodies. They are separated from their land, from their family, from their community, and that separation is so profound, it's as if they're separated from themselves.

So already, we can see something revelatory here. If you understand this story about a bunch of individuals coming back to life, you're only understanding half of what's going on. Because it's really not about a bunch of individuals. It's about a community with a shared history, a shared trauma, and a shared memory. These are not a bunch of people who happened to die of old age after long and happy lives. The author makes the point clear when it says they were slain. They are a group of people who have been crushed under the Babylonian army and sent away in exile to spend the rest of their days alone.

And what does God say to Ezekiel? "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD." What brings these bones back to life is not an overwhelming act of God that drops down from the sky. It's not a magic trick or even a miracle as we normally think of them. It's the words of a person, just like you or me. God doesn't burst on the scene and say, "Let me fix it." God looks at Ezekiel, at you, at me, and says, "Why don't you say a few words."

We often underestimate the value that words can have. It's all talk. It's just a bunch of words. When God invites the prophet to speak, the invitation begins, "Speak to the wind." And that feels about right. What are words going to do for a people who have been deported from their home? What are words going to do to people who are dead? What are words going to do to a people who are separated from everything they know and love? Trying to proclaim the good news in the midst of death feels like speaking into the wind.

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But, according to the prophet Ezekiel, those words can do quite a bit. Because when the prophet speaks, something begins to change. As the author famously puts it, “as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.” You have to imagine this was a scary experience for Ezekiel. This is not resurrection as Easter lilies and soft pastels. It’s resurrection as a cacophony of rattling and jostling together. It’s resurrection as a construction site. Clattering, crashing, booming, bursting at the seams.

The word of God, the word given to Ezekiel and to us, is all about new connections. It’s about the connection of bone to bone, flesh to flesh, but it’s also about the connection of a people to their community. God even promises that the people will be dug up from their graves, places where they were separated from one another even in death and brought back together.

The image at the end of this story is one of the most powerful images of resurrection in all the scriptures. Ezekiel and God stand before this multitude of people who have been drawn together. And God says, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act.” In other words, God does not say, “You are better.” God says, “We’re going home.”

As we get closer to Easter, this reading should give us a little glimpse of what resurrection looks like. Not like a Thomas Kinkade painting. Not like Easter bunnies. Not like flowers. As nice or pleasant as all those things are.

But the clattering of our old bones, our hold hopes, our old stories, being remade, recast, resurrected into the body of Christ. A time and a place where new relationships are formed over old hatreds and prejudices. A time and a place where new connections are always coming to life. A time and a place where the kingdom of God is under construction.

“Speak to the wind,” God tells Ezekiel and us. “And listen for the good noise.”

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor