

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by Joe Lenow on Sunday, April 10, 2011.

Ezekiel 37.1-14
Fifth Sunday of Lent

Several years ago, I traveled to the Holy Land with my family and a group from my church. It's something I recommend everybody do at least once; it's an extraordinarily powerful experience to stand in Jerusalem, in the shadow of The Dome of the Rock, the Wailing Wall, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. I experienced many things in my time there that I will never forget, but one of the most powerful moments had to be my group's visit to Yad Vashem, the Israeli monument and museum bearing witness to the Holocaust. It is truly harrowing to walk through its halls, full of stories and artifacts from a European Jewish culture that has largely been extinguished. Yad Vashem means in Hebrew "a memorial and a name," and one of the most important tasks of the museum is to keep and add to a list now containing 3.8 million names – 3.8 of the more than 6 million Jews murdered in the Shoah. One cannot walk out of that place without being pierced by the suffering humanity inflicts upon itself, and the weight of sin which we all bear. As we walked out of the museum, preparing to board our bus, I was struck by the stone archway through which we had entered the museum. Carved into it were words from our Old Testament reading this morning – "I will put my breath into you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil."

It didn't surprise me that the Jewish people turned to these words in reflecting upon the horrific events of the Holocaust. It didn't surprise me because these words were first written in another time of desolation, when the people of Israel were given reason to question whether they had been abandoned by God. You might remember that this prophet, Ezekiel, had been born on the soil which God had promised to Abraham; the land which had been consecrated as holy by God's presence in the Temple in Jerusalem; the land which symbolized for the people of Israel all God's faithfulness to them. And you might remember that, as a young man, this prophet had watched his home burn, as the armies of Babylon swept across Judah. He was among the earliest group of Israelites to be brought in chains back to Babylon, a forced exile from his nation. The conquerors, you see, were skilled occupiers of foreign lands, and knew that they could keep control if they removed those with wealth, power, and respect in the community; those who would be looked to for leadership if there were to be a rebellion. Ezekiel was forced to watch from afar as his nation was slowly destroyed. By the end of his life, Israel had seen its Temple reduced to rubble, its monarchy ended, and its people scattered across Mesopotamia. This period of Babylonian captivity would leave permanent scars on the people of Israel, changing forever the way they understood their relationship to God. It's not surprising, then, that we hear in this passage the people of Israel crying out, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." They had been reduced to nothing – all they could do was wait for God to deliver them.

In the midst of this, God comes to Ezekiel. "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He

said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Can you imagine? God guiding Ezekiel through the valley of the dry bones, leading him throughout this wasteland – forcing Ezekiel to see exactly what Israel had become. “Mortal, can these bones live?” And the only answer the prophet can give is that God alone knows. If there is any possibility of Israel living again, of Israel serving the Lord and sacrificing in the Temple, it is not a possibility that Ezekiel can see. All he knows for sure is that there is nothing more he can do – conscious of his powerlessness, his only option is to wait for God to act.

I suspect that all of us know something of this powerless waiting – those times that seem to drag on infinitely, no matter how short or how long they are. Think about it – really think about the things that have shaped your life, that have made you who you are today. How much responsibility have you had for them? The family you were born into, for better or for worse? The town in which you grew up, or the people who have been your role models? Think about all the times you have waited for what seemed like forever, realizing there was nothing you could do to change your situation. Sometimes, these moments are brimming with hope – those final excruciating days of a pregnancy, when labor could begin at any moment. Often, though, these are – as for Ezekiel – times of trouble and despair – waiting for test results, or waiting at the bedside of a loved one. And occasionally, our lives are changed radically by events that we couldn’t possibly have predicted, and circumstances entirely beyond our control. Part of the purpose of observing Lent is for us to realize this weakness and powerlessness that so characterizes our lives – to realize that we are dependent for our entire lives upon God, and humble our pretensions that we are in control of our lives. But it can be a terrifying thing to realize just how vulnerable we really are. In these times when we are plagued with uncertainty and feel tossed about by the world, we can call out for God – but it is in precisely these times that God can feel farthest away, and most silent. “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

Yet God does not leave us in the valley of the dry bones. As Ezekiel tells us, God “said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord. . . 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.’” What we find in this vision, given to Ezekiel at the darkest moment in Israel’s history, is a renewal of the promise given to Abraham. Yes, you have sinned. Yes, you have turned away from the Lord. But you will return to the land that you have been promised, and your descendents will be as numerous as the stars of the sky even still. It might not seem like it now, but I will still be your God, and you will be my people. What this vision tells us is that God is working even still to renew us – to bind together the pieces of ourselves that we have scattered in our brokenness. Though we might only be able to hear the rattling of your dry bones, the Spirit of God is giving us air to breathe. And God is laying on us the very sinews of creation, the relationships that hold us together as a church and as a world, restoring us to our families, friendships, and environment. It won’t be a quick process, and as the rather gruesome imagery of this passage makes clear, it won’t be pretty. But slowly, over the course of our lives and even beyond their ends, we are being reconciled to God and to one another. In spite of the helplessness we sometimes feel, God is acting.

And so we find that though we are powerless in ourselves, we are strong in the power of God. Though without God's help we can do nothing, with God's help we are called to transformation – like Ezekiel, we are sent into a desiccated world and promised that God's Word goes with us. While we might be nothing but dry bones, God puts flesh on us and makes us the hands and feet of Christ – charged with working for justice in our communities, with feeding the poor, with fighting for a quality education for all people, with fighting against the spread of HIV at home and abroad.

Yet if we do these things as followers of Christ, we must always return to our own weakness. If we have any hope that new life will be breathed into us, we must walk again through Holy Week – to know again the betrayal of Christ, and the devastating failure of his ministry in the eyes of the world on Good Friday. If we wish to rise with Christ into this new power of God, to live in the hope of our own resurrection, we must first know Christ's death, and join him in the powerlessness that conquered death. But there's something I want you to pay particular attention to this year. I want you to pay attention to the time between Good Friday and the Easter Vigil, to Holy Saturday – the time when Christ – the Incarnate Lord – lay dead in the tomb. All the wafers of consecrated Host will be consumed, the tabernacle will be empty, and the sanctuary light hanging in front of it will be extinguished – a physical reminder of the silence of God. In this time, we will wait – wait for our Lord to speak again the happy words of Easter morning. And we will wait in the knowledge of our own powerlessness. Don't let Holy Saturday pass you by, or be consumed with errands or with work; join Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones, as we pray that God will act to renew and re-create this world. Imagine the body of Christ, resting in the Holy Sepulchre – "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Amen.