Lent 5A, Floyd-Willis Lutheran Parish

March 29, 2020

Our theme this morning seems to be death –

not water, not light, not life - but death.

Death. “These bones are the whole house of Israel”

the Lord says to Ezekiel,

“the people are physically alive but spiritually dead.”

Death.

According to Paul, our setting the mind on the flesh is death. The flesh for Paul is making ourselves to be god.

Death. Jesus' close friend Lazarus had been very ill.

And when Jesus heard of his illness from Lazarus' two sisters, Mary and Martha, he didn’t rush to Lazarus' side.

Instead, Jesus waited two days before travelling to Bethany.

By the time he arrived, Lazarus had been dead for four days.

I believe it is safe to say that we all have all experienced the kind of hopelessness that the prophet Ezekiel describes,

that the gospel of John portrays & that Paul writes about.

If you have never looked out upon a valley of dry bones – it can only be because you are not looking

or you have not lived long enough yet.

Dry bones. Scientists warn that we are currently experiencing the sixth mass extinction event,

an extinction of plant & animal life not seen for sixty-five million years. I won’t even mention climate change & the possible extinction of us all.

We live among the dry bones of income & asset inequality in the world.

A study by the [World Institute for Development Economics Research](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Institute_for_Development_Economics_Research) at United Nations University reports that the richest 1% of adults alone owned 40% of global assets in the year 2000, and that the richest 10% of adults accounted for 85% of the world total.

The bottom half of the world owned 1% of global wealth.

"The world has enough for everyone's needs, but not everyone's greed," Mahatma Gandhi said.

In Chad Meyers book on Sabbath Economics, he reminds us of this same truth.

That the dry bones of disparity in wealth and power are not God’s way but the result of human sin. God’s model calls us to the practice of redistribution, never mistaking the Creator’s gifts as ours as individuals but ours as a whole.

Dry bones. The [United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization](http://www.fao.org/state-of-food-security-nutrition/en/) (FAO) estimates that about 815 million people of the 7.6 billion people in the world, or 10.7%, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2016.

Dry bones.

We know the dry bones of failed or broken relationships.

The dry bones of bankrupted businesses, failed exams,

the dry bones of friendships severed.

The dry bones of dreams not realized,

hopes never reached, spirits gone dry.

So God tells Ezekiel to speak to these bones.

To preach to them.

To encourage them.

To call them beyond themselves.

To tell them they can be more than dry bones,

that they can be sweet, life-giving bones.

To tell them of God’s promises;

to call them towards the future.

When Ezekiel speaks, indeed God does stir up the bones and causes them to find each other. To come together.

To regain muscle and tissue. To come to life again.

“Oh, my people, I will put my Spirit within you,

and you shall live.”

For our dry bones to come to life,

we have to call upon God’s help,

it is only with God’s Spirit, God’s Breath, God’s Ruach

that we will succeed.

With God’s help, we dare to risk loving again.

With God’s help, we will find the courage to start over with new plans, to create plans, to dream of the future.

With God’s help, we can be vulnerable in our brokenness.

God’s word of hope makes all things new.

This theme recurs again and again throughout the biblical story: there is no situation that is without hope for people of faith. But hope doesn’t exist in isolation.

It is realized in community, where is nurtured, stirred up and shared. “I will put my spirit – my breath within you says the Lord and you shall live.”

Both times “you” is used, it is a plural “you”. We southerners have a word for that. People may make fun of it, but “ya’ll” is truly a helpful pronoun. “I will put my spirit – my breath within ya’ll says the Lord and ya’ll shall live.”

The Bible promises that one day everything will be put right and we will be whole again. But until that day, we live in the in-between times, waiting for our hopes to be fulfilled.

As Jesus approaches Lazarus' tomb,

we realize that it is an in-between time for him too.

Jesus is at a moment between life and the death that awaits him on the cross. And even though he will rise again, just as he will resurrect Lazarus, that fact does not negate the pain and suffering and dying that he will choose to walk through for our sake. And Jesus wept.

I love to claim that image of Jesus weeping.

When Jesus experienced the loss of his friend, even though Lazarus will live again, Jesus weeps.

We have the gift of tears that remind us to weep.

The younger me found tears to be few & far between but that has changed as I’ve grown older.

Do we need to weep this morning?

Physical distancing is growing,

sheltering in place orders are expanding,

more people are getting sick and the death rate in our country alone has doubled within the last 72 hours.

33 million people have applied for unemployment,

660,000 cases in the world & 31,000 deaths.

people are questioning the government,

conversations swirl with thoughts of conspiracy,

anxiety is rampant & the end of this crisis seems far away.

In these times of terrifying 24/7 headlines,

Jesus weeps with us.

In the in-between time there are tears.

In the in-between time there is also work to do.

Jesus told his disciples and us to follow him.

To love as he loved. To serve as he served.

To lay down our lives for others just like he did.

This week a friend listened patiently and compassionately to another friend.

This week a parent brought out the best in her child.

This week health care workers willingly sacrificed their lives for the lives of others.

This week millions around the world opted to shelter in place for the sake of the weak, the vulnerable and the elderly.

This week a kind word was spoken, someone gave up some time to nurse a relative, and a brother and sister made up.

In the in-between time, we are called to serve

and when we do there is hope.

If I were to invite everyone listening in this morning to share we would hear all kinds of stories.

Stories of dry bones. Stories of hope.

We would hear stories of God working in peoples’ lives.

We would hear how God is strengthening faith.

We would hear stories of dry bones that have been renewed.

George Matheson was a seminary student in the 1800’s in Scotland. When he lost his sight, his fiancé broke off their engagement. He struggled to finish his education and was eventually assigned a small, rural parish.

It would have been easy for him to grow bitter,

easy to see no future, but listen to the third verse of the hymn he wrote years later:

“O joy that sleekest me through pain

I cannot close my heart to thee.

I trace the rainbow through the rain

And feel the promise is not in vain

That morn shall tearless be.”

This is who we are called to be –

people proclaiming resurrection,

people with a vision to see through the darkness,

people living in hope of even in the valley of dry bones.

We don’t know when we will return to our churches in person or when we will physically embrace each other again

or when we will get back to work in our offices or find grocery stores with fully stocked aisles.

We can know, however that God continues to call dry bones to become living, breathing human beings.

The one who raised Jesus will sustain us even now.

God is with us weeping and working and asking us to come along as She does what only She can do.

The Bible promises that one day everything will be put right and we will be whole again.

Living in the in-between times,

we wait to see our loved ones who have passed on through death, we wait for the scars & wounds we carry around inside to be healed.

we wait for our sinful natures to stop battling with us.

we wait for a closeness to God that is strong and beautiful

and life-giving without all the walls we put between us.

In the in-between time, may we be the ones to see the possibility of life when everyone else sees death.

Let us dare to face the future with hope.

Let us dare to be a people who believe

that in God there is life.

A people who believe that the wind of God’s Ruach is breathing life, love and hope all around and through us.

Dorothe Soelle, a Roman catholic theologian and writer says that she learned that one of God’s names is “All-is-possible.” She writes: I know that if I can’t talk to “All-is-possible”,

if I do not listen to “All-is-possible”,

if I do not believe in “All-is-possible” then I am dead.

This morning, may we have confidence that “All-is possible” is present among us and at work bringing life and renewal,

even as we weep, even as we work, even as we hope.

For therein, we will know life.

Amen.