

Reflection on Ezekiel 37: 1-14

We are waiting. The prophet Ezekiel had his experience with God in the valley of dry bones at a time when he and his own people were waiting. They were waiting far from their home, living in exile in Babylon wondering if and when their God would act to restore them. In this uncertain time, Ezekiel is taken by the Spirit into a valley of dry bones; a place devoid of any sign of life or hope. These, in God's words, are the bones of the slain. In other words, these bones are not simply from those who've died, but from those who were violently killed, presumably by Babylon in the conquest of Judah and Jerusalem; killed by the forces of power-seeking, empire, and greed. Ezekiel finds himself surrounded by the result of violence, of sin, just as we find ourselves surrounded by violence, by sin. While the imagery of the text may bring to mind images of the Holocaust or other modern genocides, the results of violence surround us now in many ways. Just this last week over 50 unarmed Palestinians, some of them children, were killed in Gaza. Additionally there was another school shooting in Texas, following a rather deadly weekend of gun violence in St. Louis. And those are just a couple of examples of physical violence, and violence comes in many forms. For instance, a report was released this week that 43% of American households don't have enough income to meet their basic needs; 51 million households at a time when another study reveals a pay gap between workers and CEO's ranging from 2 to 1 all the way up to 5,000 to 1. We need also consider dehumanizing language and othering that continues to be spoken, seen, and heard widely across our land, and lived out in policies that separate asylum seeking families at our border. All of these, and many others, are forms of violence, what we might call systemic or social sin that surround us all with the bones of the slain. Just as Ezekiel's people, these signs of violence may also instill within us a sense of hopelessness or helplessness. Now, while the text was written for a nation of people, we may also consider how we as individuals may find ourselves from time to time feeling as if we are dried up, dismembered, broken, hopeless maybe, and there are countless causes for such feelings. Perhaps we've been harmed by others actions or words. Perhaps we carry guilt for things we've done or left undone. Perhaps the cause is the loss of a loved one; loneliness and isolation for whatever reason; the uncertainty of a new phase in life; economic hardship; health concerns; or the ongoing stresses of daily work and family life. There are many reasons why we may find ourselves waiting and wondering if we will be restored. And Ezekiel brings this good news: yes, God will act, but not alone.

Here in this valley of dry bones, God works through the prophet to do a miraculous thing. God instructs the prophet, the prophet speaks, and suddenly these bones come together and are covered in sinews, flesh, and skin. Then God instructs the prophet to beckon the Spirit, the creative and life-giving breath of God, to come into the slain and revive them. The prophet does, and every one of them rises anew. God then explains that the bones represent the whole nation of Israel who had been feeling abandoned and hopeless. But God through the prophet reassures them that God will act, open up their graves, breath new life into them, and restore them to their fertile land, as some translations render it. They would have life once more, and have it abundantly. It was a promise, and one day would be fulfilled. In spite of the ways Ezekiel himself had said Israel had rejected God's ways, living in such a way that consequently brought their destruction, God would yet revive them. But it would not be easy, and there would be waiting, just as for us, whether we await the renewal of the world God loves ourselves, it may not be easy, and there may be waiting.

Reflection on Acts 2: 1-21

The disciples as well were in a time of waiting. The one whom they followed had been killed, had been resurrected, and had appeared to them over the course of 40 days before ascending to heaven, leaving them only with a promise that the Spirit would come. And so they waited. Then one day, as they were again in a room together, there came the sound like the rush of a violent wind; the breath of God had entered. And tongues like fire rested upon each of them, filling them with the Spirit and enabling them to speak in other languages. Outside, Jews from every nation then heard about God's deeds of power in their own language, and gathered in their amazement to try to understand what was happening. Peter then interprets the event using the words of the prophet Joel that stated God would pour out God's Spirit on all flesh, men, women, young, old, slave, or free, and grant them dreams and visions and salvation. What happened in this moment is that God through the Spirit working through the disciples made it possible for people who were divided, even on the basic level of language, to suddenly be drawn together into this new thing that was being born that we now call the church. Even then and there God was giving a vision of a unified people from every nation, from different places and walks of life; granting them the Spirit that would enable them to dream with God about what was possible and put action behind those dreams. Donald McKim writes, "The Spirit of God is now filling the world in a new way. The roll call of nations and languages points to the universality of the Spirit's work for the whole world. God's Spirit is the divine energy that now enables an eternal life to be real for those on whom God's Spirit is poured and in whom the Spirit dwells...[the event] also points toward the consummation of God's reign begun in Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the presence of the risen Christ throughout the world, working in and for the world as it moves towards the fullness of God's reign." So, in the Pentecost moment, God is drawing all of those who would open themselves to the Spirit into the divine reality. Like in Ezekiel's vision, God is drawing together members into a new body, assembling sinews, flesh, and skin, and breathing new life into it to move the world toward the fullness of God's reign. Friends, on Pentecost, we, the church in the world, became the sinews, the flesh, the skin that now embody the Spirit of the living Christ, and we are animated to receive and live out God's holy dreams and visions where all that once destroyed and hindered life, and separated and divided people is done away with. We are enabled to share with the world new and better ways of being together; living in spirit-filled ways of love, justice, and peace; ways that bring healing, wholeness, and hope into the world. Like gathering together as we did a few weeks ago to examine disparities throughout our region and imagine ways we might work to counteract systems that hinder the lives of our neighbors. Like opening up our parsonage to bring stability to the lives of a family who were waiting on a miracle. Like being a place where others who have been drawn by the Spirit can become a part of this community, as they are throughout the weekend, and as around 60 people did over the last year, joining their gifts with ours to share God's love with one another and the world. Like... well you tell me. (Congregational responses). You see, this is a Spirit filled place, evident in so many ways. I'll conclude with this question: so what is next? What dream or vision is the Spirit sharing with us as a community, or you as an individual, that it may become a reality through us? What other ways can we imagine living our communal life or daily lives that embody the Spirit of the Living Christ bringing love, justice, peace, and renewal into the world.