

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NRSV)

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." Then he said to me, "Prophecy 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."

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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," says the Lord.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

A couple of weeks ago, the confirmands interviewed our congregation president Ann Wolfgang. They were putting together a timeline of the congregation's history and asking Ann about what happened at various times. When we got to 1999, Ann paused for a second and said, "Well, let's face it. That just wasn't a very good year. There was a lot of conflict and disagreement, and it just wasn't a very good year."

I was very grateful that she said that. I wasn't here then and many of you probably weren't either, but you hear stories, and I think it's important that we have a certain amount of honesty about ourselves and our histories. We'd like to believe as disciples and communities of disciples that every year, every month, every day is one of continuous progress, continuous growth in grace, but that's just not true. There are going to be difficult days, difficult months and even difficult years.

In the Old Testament reading, in Ezekiel's powerful vision of a valley of dry bones, Judah is having a bad spell. In 722 BCE, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrians to the north, and the people were enslaved and scattered. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was spared because, frankly, it wasn't worth conquering. Thinly populated, dry and mountainous, Judah survived as a nation. But, 135 years later, in 586 BCE it was Judah's turn. The Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah, sacked and burned Jerusalem, destroyed the temple and carted Judah's upper class off to exile in Babylon.

This was a crushing blow to Judah and to Ezekiel. Today's Psalm, Psalm 137 describes the lament of the people. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and there we wept." "How can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

The valley of dry bones describes the condition of the people of Israel. “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost, we are cut off completely,” they say. We are surrounded by foreigners who treat our God with disdain. We are enslaved, we are in exile, taken from our homes and our land. We are spiritually dried up.

And perhaps most importantly, they are cut off from God. God, after all, has promised to be present in the Temple. The Temple is the only place for worship, for sacrifice. Their God has either abandoned them or become too weak to protect them.

The theme of *exile* is one of the great themes of the Bible. In a sense, exile is the theme of the second chapter of Genesis -- Adam and Eve, exiled from the Garden, are cast out to live East of Eden, cast out of paradise. It is the theme of the wonderful parable of the prodigal son who had to live in exile in a strange land far from home. In today’s reading, the people of God are exiled from the land that God had given them, exiled from the Temple that is God’s home and their own heart. Exile is also a theme that we experience in our lives – the sense that we, too, are in some way, East of Eden, estranged from our God and from one another.

We live as exiles in a culture that no longer recognizes the Sabbath. We live as exiles in a culture that no longer recognizes the worth of every individual, of every life. We live as exiles in a culture where everything of value can be bought or sold, in fact where the value of things is precisely what they can be bought or sold for.

So what can we do? How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? One alternative for the people of God and for us was suggested in Pastor Wendy’s fine sermon last week. We could become blind, we could simply refuse to recognize that we are in exile. We could close our eyes to our estrangement. We live could blindly in exile.

That is not what the Israelites did in the reading from Ezekiel. The people knew they were in exile. They knew they were nothing but bones, dried up and cut off. But they would not forget their God or his promises. As the Psalmist writes,

If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not
remember you.

One of the great mysteries of history – or perhaps one of the great *miracles* of history, is that in the two generations that Israel spent in exile in Babylon, they did not forget their distinctive relationship to God. Instead, Israel began a period of enormous creativity. The period of exile was the period when the Israelites committed the Old Testament to paper – actually to parchment and scroll. The period of the exile was a period in which Israel came to understand its relationship with God, a relationship of cycles of disobedience and disaster, obedience and rescue, peace and favor leading to forgetfulness and another round of disobedience and disaster.

So the time of exile was a time of trial but also a time in which the house of Israel was tested and tempered. They were bad years, bad times, but also times that made the people of God what they were to become, a people with enormous faith and persistence in the worst and best of times. Just as God used 1999 to make us a better congregation, a more faithful people here in Calvert County.

Can we make the same use of our time of exile? Because, make no mistake, we are as deeply in exile as the Israelites in Babylon. So we come back to the question God asks Ezekiel and we ask ourselves, “Can these bones live?” Can we become disciples, can we become the people we want to be?

I’ve always been a little dissatisfied with Ezekiel’s answer – “Oh Lord, you (alone) know.” I’d want to say, “Yes, Lord,” but

then, of course, the Lord might ask, “How? How will they live?” and I’d have to give an answer. Or I might want to say, “If you say so, Lord, then they will.” But then the Lord might say, “Yes I say so,” and then I would have to act, to do something, and I don’t know what I would do.

But what the Lord says to Ezekiel is, “Mortal, preach to these bones.” Preach to these people in exile. Preach to them, tell them about my promises, tell them about my love for them, these wayward people, tell them about my hopes for them. Tell them that I have always been faithful, even when they weren’t. Tell them that I never slept, I never gave up hope, I never left them. Tell them that I was always with them and I always will be. Tell that to these dry bones. And isn’t that what we are doing this morning? Recalling God’s promises, God’s love, God’s hopes, God’s faithfulness that knits these bones with sinews, skin over flesh.

And the Lord tells Ezekiel and tells us, “Preach to the breath.” Call out to the four winds and to the Spirit that brings life and breath to these piles of bone and flesh, that brings purpose to these people, love to these families, hope to these hopeless people, these people who are lonely even in crowds, people who are lost even with their GPS, people who have thousands of tunes but no music, piles of possessions but no birthright, acres of land but no home. Call out to the Spirit, bring these people purpose and love, hope and fellowship, direction and music, a goodly inheritance if they only will claim it.

And the Lord God says, I am going to open the graves that you are living in and I am going to bring you back to the land I have given you. I will put my spirit in you and you will live, you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and I will act. Thus saith the Lord. Amen.