

Faith Begets Hope

March 26, 2023

Ezekiel 37:1-14

It all started on March 11, 2020. We all woke up to discover that this little bug that was making its rounds wasn't so much of a "little bug" at all, but rather a full-blown pandemic. From there, the mandates began going into effect one after another. Only "essential workers" had to show up in person; everyone else was to find a way to work from home. Stores, restaurants, churches, concert halls, all areas of public space were forced to shut down. Vacations, weddings, celebrations of life events were placed on hold indefinitely. YouTube, Facebook, and other social media websites became enamored with videos on how to wear a mask, how to wash your hands properly, what symptoms to be watchful for, how far the germs in one's sneezes and coughs travel, and so much more. The fear of catching and spreading this bug led to people only leaving home when absolutely necessary, leading to feelings that neighbors just a couple doors down were states away and family members in other states may as well have been in another galaxy. Every day felt like the last, and without our weekly rituals to mark what day it was, every day ran together, time seemingly standing still. The rise of anxiety and depression amidst the isolation, the fear, led to feelings of absolute hopelessness in some, a hopelessness not unrelated to that of the Israelites in today's story.

At this point in "Ezekiel," the Israelites are in exile from the Promised Land for their sinfulness. Now, bear in mind, this exile lasted longer than their time wandering around the wilderness. At the point this vision takes place, it has lasted so long that the Israelites have lost all hope of any kind of redemption. Days became weeks, weeks became months, months became years, and years became decades, all without a word from God. Understandably, after years of unanswered prayers turned to decades, the Israelites have given up praying. They see themselves as better off or as good as dead at this point. What reason have they to hope, to pray? We can relate to these thoughts. The original bug evolved into other variants like Delta, Omicron, Deltacron, and others. It was just one variant after another, one wave followed by another, and with each new variant, each new wave, any hope we had of getting back to "normal" dried up alongside our hopes of ever being rid of this virus. However, just as God did not abandon us, nor did They abandon the Israelites.

In the reading, God pulls Ezekiel aside, shows him this vision of a valley filled with not just bones, but dry bones, and tells him to prophesy to them, to tell them to rise and have life. Now, bear in mind, Ezekiel is a prophet. So, God telling him to "prophesy" to the bones is God telling him to do what he did best. Ezekiel is not having to do anything out of the ordinary or anything beyond his skill set. What Ezekiel *is* having to do differently, though, is to have faith, faith that God can do anything They set Their mind to, faith that God has not abandoned Their people to a veritable damnation in exile, faith that these bones will not rise up and turn against the one who prophesies to them, faith that he can command and prophesy to the *ruah*, the Hebrew word for "wind," "breath," and "Spirit." In a place of hopelessness brought on by crumbling faith, he had to have faith and hope, but that's not all.

Let's take a moment and consider these bones. On one level, these bones represent death, the end to what has already begun. Additionally, though, as I've mentioned, these bones are

representative of the Israelites whose hope is so far depleted that they view themselves as good as dead. Probably most shocking, though, is the uncleanness of these bones. Corpses, skeletons, to touch even one of them is to be declared ritually unclean. This is a valley not just of death and hopelessness, but of uncleanness, sinfulness. Nonetheless, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to them, to bring life out of death, righteousness and redemption out of sinfulness, hope out of hopelessness. These themes are reminiscent of where we are headed with Lent. Our eyes are fixed on that Cross, this symbol that evoked fear and shame among Jesus and his people. We look to Jesus hanging on that Cross, dead, taking the sins of the world onto himself, the hope of redemption dying with him on the Cross. However, that is not the end. Then comes Easter, where life comes out of death, redemption comes out of shame, hope is renewed, and salvation is made ours, despite our sinfulness. God is doing a new thing, establishing a “new normal.”

So, too, is this true for us. Changes are happening all around us, some more obvious than others. We take delight in how things are, how things may have been. We find comfort in what has been and what presently is, but what carries us forward in the face of change, what reinvigorates our “dry bones” when we have lost hope, is our faith: faith that God can do anything; faith that, though God’s ways may not always be the most obvious, they are just and Their plan is sound; faith that God will never abandon us, but will see us through even those bone-filled valleys where the shadow of Death is all-too obvious. All it takes to reinvigorate the dry bones in ourselves and others is faith. How is your faith reinvigorating, giving hope and life anew, to you and those around you?