

Lent 5- Year A- Ezekiel 37:1-14
(April 9-10, 2011)- Intern Travis Wilson

We have an opportunity today to do something that my parents used to yell at me for. We get to do something that our schoolteachers would tell our parents about and something that our bosses at work would certainly write us up for. Today we get to daydream. We are invited to get lost in our lessons from Ezekiel and from John. It is a day to set aside some time to enter into the visions and open our eyes to the depths of these stories.

It is relatively easy to imagine the scene in Bethany at Lazarus' tomb. Many of us know what it is like to face the death of a loved one, and somewhere in our grieving; we want to plead with someone to make it better. "Lord if you had been here, our brother would not have died" exclaim Mary and Martha. As we stand in front of the tomb, we can hear the sobbing from the sisters, from Jesus, and from the Jews. The stench of death that putrid smell that fills up the nostrils of everyone gathered around begins to linger and fill up our own nostrils. Our hearts beat faster as we listen to Jesus call Lazarus to come out from the tomb. And when he emerges from the cave, we can see the look of amazement on each person's face as what Jesus says comes true, yet again. In my mind, I can also hear the music swell, the trumpet fanfare blazing forward as it reaches the highest point of musical bliss telling us that good has won the day. We can put ourselves in this story; we can see and feel its depths.

Yet, we can also open our eyes and join in the depths of the vision of our first lesson from Ezekiel. I must admit, however, that this vision is a bit more complicated. You see with this vision, we are taken with the prophet Ezekiel by the hand of the Lord into the depths of a valley that is full of bones. Everywhere we look there are bones. Look around on the ground- in front of you, behind you, beside you- don't you see the bones: the skull here, the femur there, the tibia strewn about; there are bones everywhere. My daydream would tend to see them as bleached white bones and they would remind me of some skeleton that would

fascinate Kristen on the TV show *Bones*. Or perhaps we get a picture of what this would be like if we watched the Disney movie *The Lion King* and saw the elephant graveyard scene; perhaps that is what this valley looks like.

I don't like this valley, not one bit. If I were Ezekiel, I would want to plead with the Lord and say, why have you brought me here? Ezekiel walks around this valley of bones, bones that are very dry. I don't like this valley because these bones are human bones, I don't like to see this massive pile of human bones. What are they from? How did they get here, and why does the Lord want to bring me to a place of dead, dry, human bones- what on earth is the Lord thinking? The Lord turns to Ezekiel and asks, "Mortal Man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel answers the Lord, "Oh Lord God, you know." The prophet Ezekiel is best known for his visions, and these visions are not the type of visions where you stand around and just look. Ezekiel is an active participant in the visions- God speaks, and he answers.

It is worth lingering for a minute on Ezekiel's answer to God. Ezekiel utters his response in an exasperated, deeply exhausted voice, "Oh Lord God, you know." The prophet today could easily see himself as one of these dry bones. In the year 597 BCE, Ezekiel was taken into exile at the hands of the Babylonians. He prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah and the people he's prophesying to are far from what God wants them to be. The temple has become corrupt due to lack of oversight from the priests; the kings have not done a good job of ruling their people, the armies cannot do much to protect the people from the Babylonian invasion. The Babylonians have taken them captive, ransacked and destroyed the temple, and have left the people feeling hopeless. The Jewish people thought that the temple was the dwelling place of God, and if the temple has been destroyed, maybe God is not as powerful as they imagined. Ezekiel prophesies to these people who are held captive by the Babylonians, yet he is also one of them and tiredly joins in their lament to God, "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

We can resonate with this valley, we can see the places in life where our bones are dried up and it seems as if our hope is lost. We could take Ezekiel into downtown Muskegon where he could walk through the streets and see the many factories and businesses that have shut down and exiled their employees into retirement or other cities or countries. We could take him to the Family Promise day center when a family enters the program after having lost their home, possibly their job and is struggling to identify who they are in the midst of a life turned upside down. We could take him into the home of someone who has lost a loved one, into the hospital room of people nervously awaiting test results, into the office of the person who is next in line to receive a pink slip from their boss, into the home of a family who has lost the sense of balance and stability in society, into the crowded jail cells of people who have made mistakes, into the nation of Japan that is ravaged by disaster. We too, much of the time, can echo the lament of the Jewish people, “our bones are dried up, our hope is lost.”

In the midst of the valley of the dry bones, which are the whole people of Israel, the Lord commands Ezekiel to prophesy three times. First, he prophesies to the bones, and there is a rattling noise and he sees bone coming upon bone, sinew joining with the bone, and flesh covering them as they lay upon the ground. But there was no breath or spirit in them. Ezekiel prophesies to the breath as the Lord commands and the breath enters the bones and makes them come alive. God tells the prophet that these bones are the whole house of Israel and Ezekiel prophesies to them that the Lord will open the graves and bring them forth into the land of Israel. The Lord’s spirit will be put in them, they shall live and shall know that the Lord has spoken and will act.

In the midst of this vision of the valley of dry bones, the Lord sets before Ezekiel and the people of Israel a larger vision. Ezekiel prophesies to the people that they are not without hope and God has not abandoned them to the Babylonians. God is a God of steadfast love, and is the one who holds fast to the covenant that God made to the Israelites long before this time of exile. God is a faithful God who restores hope by breathing new life into the people and reviving them to be people

who are in a right relationship with God. It is the spirit of God that is the important thing, for the spirit gives life, the fullness of life. As Dr. Rolf Jacobson from Luther Seminary puts it, “there is no place on earth, no when in time, and no what in sin or situation, that can keep God's Spirit away from God's people.”¹

We too, like the house of Israel, are called to open our eyes to God's bigger vision for our lives. Our hope is not lost; our hope is restored through the breath of God who breathes new life into the valleys of our dry bones. The valley of dry bones isn't the end; death is not the end. God breathes into us and we are given life. So take heart Family Promise families. God has breathed life into congregations and people that will give you rest and get you back up on your feet. Take heart you who wait in hospitals and doctors offices for test results, God is putting breath into you so that your bones might know healing. Take heart you who are grieving the loss of loved ones, God's spirit is filling you with hope through the resurrection of Jesus. Take heart you who are in Japan, relief workers and organizations are being formed to provide aid and to be a light at the end of the tunnel. Take heart First Lutheran Church, for God has breathed new life into our community this weekend through all those who formally join us in our life of discipleship and love of others. When we open our eyes to God's vision, the vision that is bigger than us, we can see that God is indeed faithful and ever present around us just as God promised.

As we enter into the last week of Lent, our journey takes us closer to Golgotha, the place of the skull, another valley of bones where Jesus will be nailed to the cross. We know the ending of the story; we know that Jesus' death brings resurrection and that as God breathes new life into Jesus, we too will receive God's breath of new life. This is God's promise to us, that though we die, we will live. This is the valley I like, the one that I want to be a part of. This valley infused with the breath of God causes the bones to be brought to life. It is this valley that makes

¹ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=3/9/2008&tab=1

for the best daydream in the world, for in this valley as far as the eye can see we find the presence and hope of God. As we continue on our journey toward Easter, take heart and trust in the word of God spoken through Ezekiel, “know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”