

HOPE AS REROUTING LIFE

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Our scripture reading this morning is one of the strangest stories in all of scripture. One of the great prophets – Ezekiel, has a dream. The reason this dream is described is because it's so vivid and because it's so full of hope for a people who have lost all hope.

In the dream, Ezekiel is brought by the Spirit in the middle of a valley. Valleys were the places where big battles were fought. We're told that this valley was full of bones. Ezekiel is led all around these bones and he says that there were very many of them. He also says they were very dry. Obviously, they had been there a long time. Any flesh and tissue that had been on them had long broken down so long had they been exposed... Clearly, this is a depiction of a devastating defeat and slaughter of the Hebrews long ago... Those who hadn't been killed including women and children back in the villages and towns had been taken far away to serve alien masters, or left behind to work the land for their new masters... Whatever the case, these bones offer a vision of massive loss, hopelessness and defeat.

And like any vivid biblical vision, what is described as a physical disaster is described as a spiritual disaster too. "Then God 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.'" For Hebrews not to be able to bury their dead and not to be able to collect the bones of their loved ones and bury them on their own land... this compounds the pain of the loss in ways difficult to imagine... The trauma of this vision for Ezekiel and his people is profound and overwhelming.

And yet, this vision is about hope, a hope that begins to heal even before any tangible fulfillment actually happens. It's a vision intended to reawaken something that has dried up. It's a vision aimed at building fresh resilience, determination with patience and openness to what can yet be. So how does that happen? How is hope reawakened when it has died up? How can anyone live again and breathe again, and aspire and hope again when the trauma of what has been suffered and lost is so vivid in waking hours and nighttime terrors too?

Well, hope begins again when the dream is no longer just a reimagining of the terror. Now the dream also images hope. The prophet's dream provides a blueprint for the people to begin to heal. Even before they return to the land, they need to return to themselves as a people again, to find themselves again, to breathe again and to hope again.

1) First of all the prophet finds words to describe what his eyes have seen and his heart has felt. The great writer and holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said that it took him ten years to be able to talk about what he witnessed and endured in the concentration camps. Ten years with no

words but his terrifying dreams! How long did it take Ezekiel? How long will it take the people? The first step is to find words, to talk about what has happened, what has been witnessed, to make connection with one another rather than remain isolated in horrible memories etched as scenes and night terrors in one's head... By proclaiming his prophesy first as a description of what he has seen, Ezekiel is giving an opening to his people to talk about what has happened to them.

2) Second, Ezekiel is told to talk to the bones, to talk to the dead, to talk to them until sinew and skin and the breath of life comes back into them... The dead must not be forgotten because it's too painful to remember... To heal we must collect the dead and make them alive among us. They are our ancestors, the communion of saints, those who are always with us not as dead bones but alive to us... No amount of tragic and cruel death can take them away from us... They must live again... It takes imagination, but imagination is no less real.

3) Third, even as Ezekiel finds words and gives voice, and even as he prophesies to the dead until they come alive, they cannot be alive until they receive the breathe of life from the divine Spirit... We can speak for the dead, but for them to really come alive they have to speak for themselves... They need to have the breathe of life in themselves... Obviously I'm speaking spiritually and metaphorically here, as is the prophet. Remember, this is his vision. But are the dead any less alive because they are not literally in the flesh so that we can touch, them, smell them, hear them with our hearing and see them take up physical space in front of us? Obviously we are sensate creatures and we grieve our dead because they are no longer with us in the flesh. This prophesy is about bringing them back to life among us in a whole new way. What will they say to us once we listen to them speak?... What will we hear?... Will we smell and touch and feel them if we open our hearts and imaginations to their presence?...

4) Finally, what the prophet receives as a vision in a dream, and what he prophesies at first in his dream, he must actually do when awake among his people... He must draw them back into life, for they are like dead bones who have dried up and have given up all hope... Unless they begin to awaken to hope, they cannot return to the land, and unless they begin to heal by talking and sharing what they have seen and lived, talking to their dead, welcoming them back to life and listening to them speak... Unless they begin to do this, they have no future... To believe in God is to hope, is to welcome back to life our dead...

Wow, isn't this super relevant for some people like, perhaps, indigenous people when they think about their ancestors killed, their children lost and murdered and buried in unmarked graves, their women and girls too? Hope of the kind Ezekiel is calling upon is relevant here. Like the people of Israel like many indigenous communities ravaged by a terrible history and despairing conditions on reserves may say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost, we are cut off completely..." Or maybe those who are homeless and on the street, who have stories of trauma, with few people interested or willing to listen or to care... Is the work of

organizations like EHM and Portland Place, and those frontline workers, and we who support this work and ministry through our money and volunteering as we support indigenous organizations and communities struggling to heal and live again... By doing this are we seeking to breathe life into dead bones and restore them in some way?...

But to do this authentically, we must also touch those places where trauma also lives in us... Theologian Douglas Hall calls such trauma many of us carry: "covert despair." Unlike many indigenous people and homeless people whose despair is more overt, we ourselves can come across as well put together, socially engaging, in control of ourselves, successful, apparently happy, financially solvent with many life options, healthy enough and surrounded by family and friends... But what about that which wakes us at night... those deeper fears that seem to have no rational explanation that can grip us... those hurts and wounds that catch us at times and erupt when we least expect them, causing us to lose control and say things and do things that sting, often to those closest to us we least want to hurt?... Despair claws at us too, even those of us with little externally to complain about...

And sometimes, we suffer things we cannot explain... Is it genetic or something else?... addiction, obsession, compulsion, depression... Brenda is someone I've known... I used to see her fairly regularly some time ago... One year, about this time of year, she seemed to have disappeared... I would see her husband and ask about her... He would say that she's a little sick but will be better soon... it's not serious... this went on for months... Finally she did reappear... She looked a bit beat up, but she was smiling and gracious and this is how I knew her to be... And then another year, this happened again... After a few months she came back and was herself once again... I asked her whether it was the same illness having come back... She asked me out for a coffee to explain...

She said she suffered from depression. And for her, depression was like a black hole she fell into. When she was in it, she lost all passion and care for life... She was lost and hopeless and totally emptied of any desire for anything. Whether she ate or slept or washed, said hello to her kids or spouse, whether she had clothes on, whether she lived or died... she had no appetite for anything... All she felt was a void... "So how did you come out of it?" I asked... "I just did", she said. Of course, she had good medical care and home care from family who were there to cover the essentials as she couldn't and wouldn't do anything... but her inner desire to live, to breathe in life and breathe out care and love and creative work... that just came when it did...

So what was hope for her? It wasn't about being restored to some life she had before depression... That was not in the cards... For her, hope had to be about rerouting life... Rerouting life, living with this despair that creeps up, talking to it, keeping it close so you see it coming without it consuming you... you resist it's temptations, are reminded to care for yourself, but also knowing that it will visit from time to time and it's not your fault. People care

for you and will love you... As you come out the other side you will thank them for it profoundly and give thanks to God too...

Hope as a rerouting of life... This is a strategy and a path to hope many of us must discover over and over again as we live... Like Ezekiel's vision of dry bones coming back to life, breathing in and out life again... we too need to come back to life... Even as life will be different and even as some doors may close for us, new doors may open, even doors that are rich and rewarding in ways we could never have imagined... We hope and we pray, and in the meantime we call on God to keep seeking us and breathing life into us, until we awaken... again... What do you think?

Prayer: Come to us, O God... breathe life into us... at this time we are living life... Give us your Spirit like the air we breathe... Amen.