**Rattling Around in the Desert**

**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

**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, “Prophesy 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, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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 prophesy, 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.**

Since most of us have had limited contact with one another because of social distancing and self- isolation this text from Ezekiel may be the tonic that we need to instill hope. There is no escaping the Corona Virus even if we are symptom free. It is the lead story on radio and television newscasts. In tandem with hearing the latest figures on new cases and a rising number of deaths we are being inundated with commercials reminding us to wash our hands and not touch our face. Radio programs have been lengthened to talk about the pandemic and how we can cope with the restrictions placed upon us by the powers that be. Parents and grandparents are homeschooling children so that they do not fall behind. Makers of spirits are using their alcohol to make hand sanitizer. Lines have been taped on the floors of retailers that are still open to the public so that we can keep a safe distance of 2 meters between ourselves and others in line at check outs and as we shop.

Restrictions have been placed on visits to hospitals and prisons in hope of containing and curtailing the threat. Once busy streets are empty and one has to look hard to find signs of vitality in neighbourhoods, markets, malls and airports. The pope says his weekly mass from the privacy of his personal chapel and the Archbishop of Canterbury has followed suit. People who work in the service industry have been laid off and tourism and travel have had their casualties. People have sat on hold with Service Canada for hours in hope of activating EI claims. It is absolutely unprecedented for me as I am sure it is for others. So as we rattle around our homes and try to find life giving and creative ways to fill our day let us do that in the knowledge and faith that God has not abandoned us; and that we will emerge from this figurative time in the desert, stronger, better and changed in a life sustaining way.

The Hebrew text from the prophet Ezekiel was written to address a very low time in their history. Ezekiel was a priest who became the spokesman for God during the Babylonian Exile, commissioned to warn his displaced, devastated and demoralized audience of pending danger. He would be called upon by God to announce the end of Israel’s cherished institutions of temple and monarchy, to proclaim the destruction of Jerusalem and an end to Israel’s relationship with the Lord’s land. And though he would be the bearer of bad news, his oracles and visions also contained an element of hope. The people would be renewed and the promise made that they would return home to the land of their ancestors pre-exile. The dry bones would quicken and a renewed sense of vitality and identity would return and God would be glorified once again.

God wishes to restore the divine reputation in the world and to dwell among a transformed community. To accomplish these goals God must deal with the pride of the nations, their aggressive exploitation and violence. Once God has dealt decisively with evil God can take up residence among a redeemed people. The image of the valley of dry bones is a testament to despair and seeming hopelessness. God asks a rhetorical question of the prophet, “Can these bones live?” And the prophet responds in such a way as to affirm the power of God to transform and make knew, “”O Lord God you know.” There is ever the possibility of life even in the wake of death because God is capable of transformation and resurrection.

I love the image of dry bones beginning to team with new life. It is a powerful symbol of restoration and resurrection, and, when the very breath of God is breathed into the nation there will be a happy and a fulfilling ending. The house of Israel will be renewed and will return home. Life will return to a more idyllic and transformed normal; a hope that we must not lose sight of as we live through social distancing and self- isolation, and possibly diagnosis and death of those we may know and love. All prognostications thus far suggest that it will get worse before it gets better but we must not lose heart or think that the measures we are taking and the sacrifices we are making is for naught.

God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and they rattled there way to form a skeleton which was then covered in flesh and muscle. And then breath was given and they rose up like a multitude of restored, hale and hardy citizens. Those who had decried that all was lost and death reigned supreme could rest assured that God would not have the nation laid waste in death and defeat. The passage culminates with the very assurance from the lips of God “I will put my spirit in you and you shall live and I will place you on terra firma and you shall know that I the Lord have spoken and will act.”

I would like to think that there will be an end to this pandemic that has gripped the world in ways heretofore I could not have imagined. This is my hope and my prayer as I wash my hands and prompt my grandchildren as they read aloud to me. But equally as important to the end of the pandemic is the new way of being that will hopefully become the new transformed norm in its dawning. Lessons learned must be integrated and not forgotten when life returns to normal. We have seen humanity respond to the virus in the best of ways and in the worst of ways.

People have panicked and bought up cleaning and medical supplies that have denied others. As I write hospitals all over the world are in fear of running out of life saving, protective equipment because supplies have been depleted with demand and senseless use. Some have seen the pandemic as an opportunity to price gouge and make a profit at the expense of others. There have been incidents of racism as people from a particular ethnic background have been shunned, avoided and treated with disrespect in an overt demonstration of xenophobia; made to feel as though the pandemic was racially inspired and is their fault. People are afraid that if we just clear our throat that we will be a suspected carrier or transmitter of the disease. But there has been an outpouring of love as well.

Neighbours are connecting to neighbours to offer support within prescribed guidelines during a trying time. Those in self isolation are being contacted and errands are being run for those who cannot do for themselves. People are gathering on balconies to show support for medical personnel and other purveyors of essential services. Songs are being sung in a demonstration of solidarity. Concerts are being streamed by professional entertainers to help pass the time and to offer the healing power of music in a time of intense vulnerability and fear. Of course those who do not have internet access are being denied these pinpricks of light and may need us to reach out in more old fashioned ways, like picking up a telephone, or sending a note or card. It continues to be the best of times as people support one another and the worst of times for opportunists and for those who are sick unto death.

Once the worst is past will we revert to the same habits that have had a devastating effect on the planet? There has been a significant drop in air pollution over China in the wake of “economic slowdown” following the virus outbreak, according to a NASA release. Dolphins and swans are swimming in the canals of Venice now that domestic and tourist traffic has slowed. We are all washing our hands more often and making very intentional decisions about staying home if we are unwell and in compliance with directives imposed for the safety of self and others. We are doing this in a demonstration of solidarity and good will as well as to what must be done to allow the threat to pass and make way for the new dawn. Even as disease and death from Covid-19 is casting its pall, new life is emerging right alongside of it. The dry bones are rattling with potential and the breath of God is bringing hope and new life.

I realize that these continue to be challenging times for all of us and I do not want to shine too bright a light on the positive ripple effect that we are experiencing on the planet. Things may get worse before they get better as we ride out this medical threat; but I think that all of us need a little hope and good news to help us ride out the isolation and restrictions.

I left my home around 6:00 a.m. this morning to look after my grandchildren when their mother left for work. It was dark and my car needed scraping because of a dusting of snow and rain that had encased my car. I started my car and was scraping the windshield and back window and all the while I removed the remnants of winter in this transitional time of early spring, birds were singing.

The last vestige of winter may stubbornly maintain its hold but the hope and promise of spring cannot be quelled. Even in the midst of self isolating and social distancing; even as new cases of Covid-19 are being reported and some are grieving the deaths of loved ones the bones are beginning to rattle with the hope of new life. Birds are singing, blissfully unaware of the restrictions placed upon their human featherless biped counterparts. Swans and dolphins are swimming in the Venetian canals. NASA has a much clearer picture of China as smog has abated. Lent will morph into Passion and the glory of the resurrection will resound in perhaps an even deeper and more resonant way in a few weeks. God is in the thick of the grief, frustration and hope as new life is breathed into dry bones. “Mortal can these bones live? O Lord God, you know; you know!”

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer:

Loving God, these are challenging times in which we live. We pray for your blessing upon those who have been affected directly by the corona virus, particularly those suffering with the disease and those who care for them. We pray this day for those who work at jobs and careers judged as essential, who daily put themselves at risk to continue to serve the needs of the wider community: medical personnel, bus drivers and cab drivers, PSW’s, grocery store clerks and pharmacists. We may grumble about having to remain isolated or at a distance, but we are less at risk than so many others. Protect them, O God.

We seek your blessing upon those who are diligently working to find a vaccine, or prescription that may treat the disease and ally its spread. We are grateful for our health and the healthcare system that supports it. Grateful too for the pinpricks of light in the dark tunnel that can affirm and inspire: the phone call from a friend or neighbour checking up on us; elected officials who are making decisions in the best interests of constituents and the population; family who are stepping up to care for children who are out of school; governments that are trying to keep us away from economic collapse.

It will be easier to see the inconvenience of self isolation and social distancing but open our eyes and attune our senses to the hope of spring that is burgeoning before us: the song of the bird; the bud on the tree; the crocus that pushes through the snow as a beacon of life and new life; the opportunity to spend time with partner, children and grandchildren and to encourage them; the time to read a book, or try a new recipe. We can complain about the inconvenience, or, we can embrace this new normal as an opportunity. Lord grace us with wisdom in the choosing.

Bless our homes and families. Bless our nation and all nations on the planet. Give us hope and peace for we ask it in the name of the One who taught us when we pray to say: Our Father.