

Are You Thirsty? Ezekiel 37:1-14

A Hebrew Prophet's job description is very simple. They are to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Much of the time the Prophets are doing the first, challenging the powerful in both government and religious leadership to take care of the poor and downtrodden and stop making themselves rich at the expense of the widows and the orphans. They afflict, or challenge those who are comfortable because their comfort is built on the backs of others. In the first few years of his ministry as a Prophet, this was Ezekiel's task: warning them of judgment which will fall if they do not change their ways.

And then everything changes. His words become historical reality as Jerusalem is surrounded by Nebuchadnezzar and his army. The Temple of Solomon is destroyed. The Nation of Israel, its government, its religion, and its people are decimated. Everything... everything they knew about life: their religious festivals, their regular sacrifices bestowing forgiveness and blessing, everything they knew about God and God's care for them, the government, the formal and informal power structures built over centuries: all destroyed.

Imagine if a great power invaded our nation, closed all the churches and synagogues and other Houses of Worship and replaced the entire government structure. And not just that but... No more baseball, 4th of July, Easter or Christmas. The name of Jesus banned from use. All the familiar flags of our history are destroyed, as are any books bearing our history... All the past wiped clean and we are no longer Americans, you cannot even put red white and blue next to each other anywhere. No, our very identity is taken away and we are forced to be something else... It would be devastating.

This is the situation for the people of Israel and so Ezekiel, remaining faithful to his job, begins to comfort the afflicted... judgment is no longer

needed, judgment has been diligently delivered, so now Ezekiel faces a much bigger challenge, God must use him to bring hope to a people with absolutely no hope. A people in total despair.

Knowing the people's pain, God gives Ezekiel a vision of a desolated valley, filled with dry bones. And God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Can these bones live, that is the question, these dry bones are the dead young warriors of Israel overcome by the army of Nebuchadnezzar. These bones are the young children who did not survive the siege of Jerusalem, these bones are the shattered pieces of the torn apart Temple of King Solomon and the Priests and the Levites. Dry bones in the desert of despair - living again? Are you kidding me?

But in the vision, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and miraculously they come together. Bone to bone, sinew to sinew but they remain lifeless. Just shadows, just a pretend people of Israel, but God is not done. God says to Ezekiel, call to the winds of the four directions to fill the bones and make them live. And we hear Ezekiel report:

I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

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.' 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. 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."

How do you think they received Ezekiel's words? I am guessing they were pretty doubtful, pretty cynical, pretty depressed. But we know in hindsight that 70 years later an altar is rebuilt in Jerusalem, and we know that the Temple is eventually rebuilt and is even greater in the time of Jesus than was Solomon's Temple. God remains faithful to the vision of Ezekiel. God restores the people and the nation and the Temple and the Holidays and the culture. "But wait a minute," you may be saying, "This is an interesting story but what has this to do with us today?"

Every day there are those among us, who face in a very personal way the kind of devastation that the people of Israel faced. They are overcome with fear when hearing a cancer diagnosis, they worry for a child addicted to drugs or alcohol, Concern about a marriage, or a layoff, or a foreclosure. They reel from the death of a long-time spouse or the death of the dreams shared with someone with whom they only got a few years. Alzheimer's Disease, Mental Illness, worry about being sick and about those who will be left behind when you are gone or too ill to help them.. There is much faith here, and much to celebrate every day, but in our Lenten journey we also must say that some of us, right here today are walking in the valley of despair among those dry, dry bones. And though not today, many of us will spend some time in that shadowed valley of hopelessness in the course of our lives.

The message of Ezekiel is that when we are out of hope, when we don't see any possible way that life can ever be good again, from the ends of the earth the four winds of God's Spirit can come and bring us back to life. We do not know how, we can barely fathom why, but God will always put us back together piece by piece, sinew by sinew, breath by breath and we will stand

again. We will stand again. This is the message of God to us from the Prophet Ezekiel, no matter what we face, even utter annihilation, we will stand again.

As we share this table, we wonder, was Jesus in that same valley the night of the Passover? He was surrounded by his disciples, good men, who had said they would march to their deaths beside him. And yet, one would betray him. The others would scatter and his best friend, one of his closest disciples, would deny he even knew who Jesus was. Did Jesus know in the Garden of Gethsemane how he would be tortured and killed and be spat upon and annihilated, only escaping being thrown on the heap of the crucified by an influential friend who arranged for a hasty burial? Though about to enter that valley, Jesus knew that his disciples would need strength to could continue his work. Courage and faith in spite of all they would witness in the coming days. And so instead of giving into the despair of dry bones in the valley, Jesus took the bread, and after blessing it, broke it, and said, this symbol of our liberation from Egypt is now become a symbol of my broken body which will also liberate you. The after supper he took the cup, and after giving thanks he said, This is the cup of the renewed promise of Passover, this is my blood shed for you unto liberation. When you eat this bread and drink this cup you remember me, until God puts me back together like the bones in that dry valley and I stand up again when I come back to you...