

3-29-20 Sermon

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Where we enter our story today, the prophet Ezekiel is in exile with many others from the tribe of Judah in Ancient Israel. They were taken captive by the Babylonians and removed from their land, and their temple, their place of worship, and everything that felt familiar and normal and okay about their lives. Yes, I would say he has something to say to us today. Ezekiel takes the chaos of his life and situation, and he responds to God's call. He is honest about the scary stuff, while also being so, so hopeful about the future they can co-create with God's help. His prophecies are vivid and evocative. Even if you've never heard any other part of this prophet's writings, I bet you've heard about the dry bones. A reading from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37, verses 1-14.

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and God brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2** God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. **3** God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." **4** Then God said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. **5** Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. **6** 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."

7 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. **8** 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. **9** Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.” **10** I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

11 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.’ **12** 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. **13** And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. **14** 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.”

Well friends, welcome to our new normal. It is our third remote worship service, we are entering week 3 of social distancing here in Minnesota, we are now under a stay-at-home order, and I want to be very clear that this is all important, and necessary, and good for us to be doing. But holy cow, I feel like a bag of dry bones. I bet many of you do, too.

Reverend Emily Scott, a Lutheran pastor and church planter in New York City, published an article about weathering the storms of a crisis. She pastored through the Hurricane Sandy fallout that hit New York especially hard, and while our times are different now, there’s a lot we can learn from the ways we’ve handled crises before. Scott says that in the midst of a crisis, our brains don’t work as well. My oh my, that feels true. My creativity feels shriveled up. My capacity for empathy and kindness is often tested in the face of decision fatigue and anger at our situation. I’m mad that we had to cancel a vacation and that we don’t have childcare and that we can’t see our family. My eyes are tired of looking at screens all day. My body is losing its handshake-hug muscle memory. Dry bones.

And yet, I want to name how callous it feels to use that metaphor in reference to my own situation when there are people for whom this crisis, this pandemic, has consequences far graver than brain fog and inconvenience. I think of our medical professionals without access to protective equipment, of the families already grieving loved ones lost to this terrible disease, of those who find themselves unemployed and desperate. These are troubling days, dear friends, and it's hard to sit with the multiple layers of grief in the midst of it all.

Which is one reason why I am so grateful for our sacred texts and the life they breathe into every situation. You see, Ezekiel was in captivity. But he had survived the attack Babylon had mounted on the Kingdom of Judah. He was one of the lucky ones, one of the privileged ones. And yet, he and his community still had much to grieve. They were still in crisis. They were still in pain. It is in acknowledging our own grief, even in the midst of acknowledging our gratitude and our privilege, that connects us to our fellow human beings around the world dealing with this very same thing.

And there's another reason I'm grateful for Ezekiel's witness here. Because Ezekiel had a choice. He could have gotten stuck in his grief and despair. Or he could respond to God's call. God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" And instead of saying, "No way, a pile of bones is not a place where I find hope," he says, "O Lord God, you know." And then he prophesies as God commands, and when it doesn't quite work the first time, he tries a second time, and his singular action ripples out to the people of ancient Israel, a beacon of hope.

I am not a Lord of the Rings fan. My uncle Bruce is an amazing human being who sent me the books growing up, thank you uncle, but I was never able to get very far into them. Well, I've added them to my quarantine reading list after the following quote came across my Facebook feed this week, shared by a dear colleague and friend Emily:

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

I understand the context referenced here is related to the rise of an evil power and a bad actor in the midst of it. But I also think of the context J.R.R. Tolkien was writing in - the Lord of the Rings trilogy was written in the build-up, duration, and aftermath of the Second World War. Having fought in the first, Tolkien was no stranger to evil and the horrors of war. And here we receive it today: not in wartime, but certainly in a fight. “All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Sharing this quote with my husband Greg made me choke up immediately. It’s the recognition that this is not a blip on the radar, a couple-week stint of strange life, but a time we are now living in. And the incredible hope that comes from knowing that, though we have no choice about what we are facing, we have a choice about who to be in these times and how to respond. Both an empowering and a terrifying prospect.

Who do you want to be in the face of this pandemic? Who do we want to be?

A lot of days, I am an anxious, frazzled, exhausted pile of dry bones. Even with the best of intentions, this does not leave me in a very good place to reach out to my loved ones, to all of you, and be anything but a magnifier of anxiety. That is not who I want to be.

A lot of days, the isolation of my home becomes an isolation of my priorities. I get pulled into feeling sorry for myself and start thinking about breaking social distancing rules to curb my cabin fever. That is not who I want to be.

A lot of days, I decide it’s all up to me to save the world, and I run myself ragged trying to do everything and end up far more exhausted than when I started, having made no positive impact anywhere at all. That is not who I want to be.

But I see a lot of what I *do* want to be going on around here.

70 members of our congregation received calls from fellow members, checking in and staying connected, using old-fashioned technology - that is who we want to be.

Adam and the neighborhood clergy group starting these prayer trees. Finding creative and tangible ways to show up for our neighbors - that is who we want to be.

ISAIAH and their leadership coming together to resource clergy in these times and support lay leaders continuing on a path toward economic and racial justice, when that fight could not possibly be more important - that is who we want to be.

Thousands of amateur sewers crafting mask covers for medical professionals so they can make their meager supplies last longer and work more effectively, using their gifts to make the best of a terrible situation - that is who we want to be.

Doctors and nurses and PCAs and grocery store clerks and garbage collectors and pharmacists and childcare workers and all those who are mustering the strength and the courage to keep working and putting themselves at risk to keep us safe, healthy, and cared for - that is who we want to be.

So I invite us all, dear friends, to take a page out of Ezekiel's book. To both inhale, and exhale. Let's try it. Breathe in. And out. As we breathe in, we are taking in all of God's goodness. God's peace and warmth. God's love. The healing that we all need in the midst of such brokenness. We inhale all of that. We need to tend to ourselves, to our own souls and our own needs and our own mental and physical health.

But then, we also need to exhale. In the face of isolation, God calls us to look outward. To breathe out the goodness we've taken in, to share it with those who need it most, and to gather communal strength in the face of such incredible suffering.

As my Hebrew Bible professor Bob Wilson said about the prophet Ezekiel, "Out of this exilic community, a new community will emerge." I don't know what tomorrow will bring, or the next month, or the next six months. But we are seeing the injustices of our economy exposed on such a universal level, we are seeing suffering and death in such grave and horrifying ways, we are seeing something we've never seen before in any of

our lifetimes, and I believe that the unprecedented nature of all of this means that this *has* to be a moment when real change is possible. Even as we walk in the wilderness on this Lenten journey, God's promise of new life is with us. So breathe in God's promises, dear ones. And breathe out God's promise of a shared future. Amen.