



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 round 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.'

Colossians 1:15-20

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Jesus is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

THIS IS THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, the day we light the pink candle, and celebrate JOY. And to talk about joy, obviously, we chose a story about zombie prophecies from the Book of Ezekiel.

But stay with me on this.

We're called to joy, but joy is hard to find when you can't find hope. And hope is hard to find when fear is being fed to you from all corners of the world.

Israel had lost hope. Babylon had carted them to exile and fed them a constant diet of bad news, encouraging them to give up, because people without hope don't fight back against their oppressors. Israel's hope was nowhere to be found. They cried to God, "Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost."

I appreciate that God meets them where they are, in their metaphorical graves. Because I think that often when we meet people who seem to have lost hope, but when we can see what they have to be hopeful about, we tell them to buck up, and be more cheerful, that things will turn around soon and don't worry, about a thing, 'cause every little thing's gonna be alright.

With all respect to the prophet Bob Marley, sometimes we lose sight of hope and we don't know, in fact, if every little thing's gonna be alright.

If God had sung that song to Israel, I don't know that they could have heard it, so cut off did they feel. So God meets them where they are, in their valley of dry bones.

The Hebrew root for the word breath is the same for the word wind and is the same for the word spirit. That root occurs eleven times in this passage. It's like the very story about dead dry bones is, itself, breathing. Because that's how persistent God is with the gift of life. God keeps breathing the divine spirit into us, even as we tell stories of our hope being cut off and our bones being dried up.

God meets them where they are, and it is from that place of despair and dry bones that God's breath, spirit, wind show up so they won't stay in their graves. "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".

God is like that. When we're comfortably situated in our metaphorical graves of despair, God shows up to pull us out of the dirt to remind us that despair is not our permanent address. It is not where God calls us to live.

As Walter Brueggemann, one of my seminary professors has written,

"Hope in gospel faith is not just a vague feeling that things will work out, for it is evident that things will not just work out. Rather, hope is the conviction, against a great deal of data, that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world, that God intends joy and peace."

One could wonder why God would need to drag us out of graves in the first place. Why would we choose despair and dry bones instead of life and joy?

Israel might have answered, "we're in exile, in case you haven't heard, and it is terrible. We do not recommend". People today might answer with, "there's a pandemic, duh, and humanity is ruining the planet, and racism is literally killing people, and some of our fellow human beings are terrible people".

And yes, all of that is true. And life isn't meant to be lived with joy only when things are perfect.

God intends our joy and peace through it all. Yes, we have sadness. Yes, we know death and loss and pain and heartbreak. And through all of those challenging times, God's breath is still filling our lungs and giving us life and hope and purpose.

We are not people of despair.

Our call as Christian flavored human beings, especially during Advent, is to trust that God is persistent in overcoming the deathliness of the world. Because God needs us to be active, working for justice, feeding the people, caring for a hurting world because we are all God's people, filled with the breath of God.

Did you notice in the story that after Ezekiel called for the breath to enter the previously dead and dry bones, they stood there, a vast multitude, it says an army in Hebrew. Breath came into them and they lived.

And when humanity gets busy living, we can do great things. Art and music and 3 point shots and sliced bread and vaccinations against global pandemics. When humanity gets busy living, we can feed and care for each other, we can build great things and make life better for everyone.

Wouldn't we rather be God's vast multitude doing that, than be a valley of dry bones?

Why do we choose despair and dry bones instead of life and joy?

I wonder if God needs to be so persistent in dragging us out of our graves because somehow we don't believe we deserve life, and goodness, and joy, and shalom.

I know I have felt that in my own life, a voice in my head telling me the love and blessings coming my way are somehow undeserved flukes. Feeling that my mistakes have made me unworthy of good things. Feeling that the bad things that happen are the deserved things and the goodness an aberration.

So, I'm preaching this for me. And I'm trusting that maybe some others of you are also needing a hand up and out of a grave we have dug for ourselves.

Our persistent belief in our own unworthiness for love and health and flourishing is a lie we tell ourselves and it is counter to the gospel. God chooses to be with and for us not because we could somehow earn that, but because God chooses to breathe the divine spirit into us and give us breath and life.

More than that, God gives us life, not out of obligation or because they lost a bet or something. God finds delight and joy in us. In Advent, we celebrate that God's choice for humanity was so complete that God became one of us, and was born a human baby, born to a poor family in an occupied territory.

When humanity keeps creating reasons for despair and hopelessness, God shows up and lives with us, right in the middle of the messes we make. War. Poverty. Violence. God was born into that so that we might know the depths to which God would go to love us.

Brueggemann writes:

"Christians find compelling evidence, in the story of Jesus, that Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability, everywhere he went, turned the enmity of society toward a new possibility, turned the sadness of the world toward joy, introduced a new regime where the dead are raised, the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again".

This is what we're about at Advent. God, in the person of Jesus, is turning the sadness of the world toward joy. As the carol we'll sing at the end of worship reminds us, "pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel". I seek your forgiveness for singing a full-on Christmas carol this early in the season, but I hope you see why I chose it.

The language in that carol—pleased in flesh with us to dwell—comes from the passage Victor read from the Book of Colossians. "For in Jesus all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven..."

While Pauline authorship of Colossians is questioned, the Book of Colossians is the strongest affirmation of Jesus' lordship in the New Testament. It seems to reflect a later development in church thought and experience than Paul's other letters. And is perhaps a corrective to people who were maybe saying that Jesus was just a nice guy and a decent teacher, but wasn't really God.

And so we get this beautiful hymn about Jesus being the first born of all creation, the image of God, for in him the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And the reason that matters for the author of the letter is because it changes the way we live together. God is pleased to dwell with us, and later in the letter, we are called to 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly'.

He writes: "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord* has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

Since God dwells with us, and God's word dwells in us, the author of Colossians argues that it informs how we live with each other too. We can't treat other people like they are just dry bones, or deserve to be living in a valley full of dry bones, if we recognize God is pleased to dwell, and is breathing life into them as God is giving us life.

Our theme for Advent is Housing the Holy. On one level, it is about the people who made room in their cow garage for a woman in labor as she traveled to Bethlehem and why it is important to welcome people into our busy and crowded lives. On another level, each one of us is already housing the holy. God was pleased to dwell in and with humanity and all creation, which makes all of our interactions with each other sacred and joyful work.

So, on this Advent Sunday of Joy, the choice is ours, although I would claim it isn't much of a choice. Do we want to be a valley of dry bones in our graves of despair? OR. Here's the other option. Do we want to be people of joy, grateful that in the midst and messiness of the world, we are children of God who was pleased in flesh with us to dwell?

I recognize there are times when we forget who and whose we are, and when despair makes sense. And so we love each other with enough compassion and care that we can find our way back to hope. Together.

Friends, let us take our part as God's vast multitude, bearers of joy into a world that needs to know of hope.