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Emanuel's Ev. Lutheran Church • Bellevue (Pittsburgh), PA
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Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11
John 11:1-45

Some times life can be a living nightmare. Abuse in our closest relationships. The horrors of war. Torment brought into lives from addiction or mental illness. Sudden or traumatic physical illness or disability. These times reach beyond our average experiences of grief or pain. One's entire world is changed, with overwhelming demands on so many levels.

For the prophet Ezekiel, life was this kind of living nightmare. The Babylonians made Jerusalem a battleground for two years, which brought starvation, despair, and disease. (*2 Kings 25:3*) They destroyed the city and horror-of-horrors, the temple itself. They killed many of the people living in Jerusalem, and sent the rest off to live, exiled in Babylon.

Ezekiel was carted off with other Jews in 597 BC. He had lost his highly-esteemed job and place in society, as a temple priest, since he no longer had a temple to serve. He heard tales of corruption of the Jewish faith life back home, without any priestly leadership. His wife died – which is bad enough. Then the God of Israel asked Ezekiel not to mourn her, as an example for others to move beyond mourning the loss of their temple. (*Ezekiel 24:16-24*) He, and so many others, experienced threat to life, and loss upon loss.

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The valley of dry bones in our Old Testament reading depicts the aftermath of this truly awful time in Jewish history. Its symbolism shows the horror of the people killed – the destruction – the injustice – the devastation of life as the people knew it. Some of us have experienced these times in our own lives. Others only have heard through second-hand tales.

Into this symbolic world of utter destruction, God spoke. “Mortal” – or dying one – “can these bones live?” (37:3) Remembering what had happened, we may hear a tone in Ezekiel’s response. One of exhaustion, resignation, despair. “O Lord God, you know.” (37:3) Slim chance, buddy. Look around. Is it possible that any life remains in such moments?

What unfolded then in Ezekiel’s vision is astounding. We know that God is a powerful one. God could have done everything without including the prophet, or anyone else. But instead God asked Ezekiel to be a part of the process. God invited the prophet to participate in the hope, in bringing life from death. God said, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.” (37:4) Ezekiel was given the opportunity not only to hear God’s word himself – but to be the one to speak it to the world, to invite the dead to life.

God’s word promised the coming of the breath of God. “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” (37:5) This same Spirit brooded over the waters at creation, and breathed life into Adam. But now the spirit would “lay sinews on [them]” and would “cause flesh to come upon

[them], and cover [them] with skin.” (37:6) The images that emerged could be scenes from a horror movie. These dry bones attracted sinews and flesh. Then these previously dead bodies came to life. “[B]reath came... and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.” (37:10) One moment: it’s a pile of unconnected, long-dead bones. The next moment: there is an army, a community of people standing.

And who was this community? It was the people of Israel, who had gone through so much. After war and violence, after they lost a sense of community and identity, after they lost hope. God promised to bring life to them again. “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.” (37:12) They had been praying for a long, long time. And God promised to answer the heart-felt prayers of the Jewish people.



Ezekiel’s vision reminds us of what the God of Israel is capable of. We sense God’s care and concern, for a people whose life together had been decimated. We hear God’s invitation for humans to look forward to, and participate in, the re-creation that God promises. We witness the power for goodness, which is possible with God’s word and spirit.

This lesson is not even from the New Testament, but it still prepares us to journey with Christ through Holy Week. Next Sunday, Palm Sunday, we will begin our worship by singing with palms. We will continue by participating in St. Matthew’s description of Jesus’ passion. We will

remember again Jesus' suffering, abuse, and unjust execution. If we let ourselves, we will be immersed in the horror of how our human sin treated God-with-us. We will hear ourselves betraying Christ, like Judas, or denying that we know him, like Peter. We can feel the disciples' deep despair at his arrest, trial, and suffering.

The prophet Ezekiel prepares us to witness the gruesome horror and pain of God's story and our negative part in it. His vision shapes our eyes to see Christ in the people around us, in our world right now, whose lives are being ripped to shreds. His vision calls out our own memories of pain and horror, lived out in our own lives. This may or may not be welcome.

All of this is not just to return to our most difficult times, or to dwell in negativity, just for the sake of it. To remember the pain, to recall our guilt, to see our neighbors truly – enables us to recognize and receive God's powerful promise of hope. Even when it seems that darkness has overtaken us, and death reigns. For God spoke new life into being for the community of Israel, long ago. God raised Christ to new life after a humiliating and torturous death. Joined to Christ, God promises new life to us, too. The word speaks hope, putting muscle and flesh on our weary bones. The spirit breathes life into our broken lungs.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” “O Lord God, you know.” *(37:3)*
Gracious God, help us to know and trust your word and hope. When you invite us, prepare us to receive – also to speak – your wonderful new life into being. Amen.