

Message: "Prophetic Enfleshment" - 3-22-26

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14

37The 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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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." ⁷So 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then 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." ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then 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.' ¹²Therefore prophecy, 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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.

Did you know that some sermons come with warning labels? This one does, and it says "WARNING: Contents may be gross or weird." That warning is appropriate because today's scripture is pretty weird. We probably don't think of it as weird because most of us are pretty familiar with the passage, but where else does the Bible spend so much time on bones? Very many dry bones. Now, how do you preach a sermon on bones?

Of course, the passage is not about bones directly, but about the most basic parts of being human; the people of Israel knew back then what we know now, that if you reduce a physical body to its most basic elements, you get bones. There is a spiritual corollary in there of course, considering our most basic elements of heart and soul, which ties into our faith. There are two points our passage brings to light - how the world sometimes strips life down to its basic structures, and how to build upon what structure is left, regardless how corrupt. Things get stripped down to the bone, sometimes; but God says he can work with bones, no matter how dry they are. Ezekiel speaks to both of these considerations.

Many years ago, when I served two churches on the eastern plains of Colorado, two young people died tragically in circumstances about a year apart. They were not connected with my churches, yet I presided over the funeral for the first person as the family had no church to which they belonged (as it is said, Methodists are the ones who will marry and bury anyone). The young man was 23-

years-old; he had died in his sleep. Everyone I spoke to, from the family members to the city funeral director to the close friends of this young man all called this a natural death; he simply died in his sleep. The funeral came around; as it is often the case with the deaths of younger people, the church was packed to overflowing; there were several people, family members and friends, who shared remembrances about this young man essentially describing him as a paragon of virtue. From what was shared in that two-hour long service, it was hard to see this young man as anything less than a saint. This is, of course, pretty normal in a setting of mournfulness; the heart has been broken, after all, and souls long for comfort and strength, which are most easily accessible through affirmations and fond memories. You do not speak ill of the dead, goes the saying, which is a respectful understanding. The service went as well as could be expected; afterward, we all went our separate ways, holding onto the fond memories and uplifting messages that would help us live with grief; at least, that's how things are supposed to go.

It was about a month later that a family member came to me and let me know that this young man had actually died of a massive overdose of illegal drugs; he had a drug problem, she said, which the family was desperate to hide, especially at the funeral. The family did not want his memory to be tainted by his addiction.

Too late, I thought; too late for that memory to be untainted by his addiction, for probably most people there knew there was something hidden going on; too late, for the efforts to hide addiction often lead to its continuance, and it had been going on for some time; too late, I found out later, to keep the abuse he was inflicting on his girlfriend from happening. Too late for the community to face what really happened, and to be newly reminded of the terrible toll drugs take on young lives in a small town where drug and alcohol addiction was a widespread problem. Too late for many things that would have helped people move on more effectively.

What happened is completely understandable, even as it is also tremendously unfortunate, for in that comfort-seeking deception was a lost opportunity to be honest in facing their grief, both for the family and the community; such honesty bears its own pain, but it ends the exhausting work of maintaining a false narrative that pretends to serve life when it actually diminishes life through deformed memory. They had, in a manner of speaking, attempted to reclothe the bones of their loved one with false flesh. This never works; tremendous pain

remained, unable to be faced due to the avoidance of reality. Perhaps the family might be excused for their deception, but the fact remains that there were probably many people in that service who might have benefited from the truth of his death, it being a very local and personal anti-drug message. Perhaps the family might have shared how the level of grief's pain increases when people they love are significantly involved in their own demise, countering the appeal of illegal substance use. Perhaps the family revealing the truth would have had others with similar experiences embrace them more strongly in the bonds of common pain; perhaps the community could have become more motivated to deal with the serious drug problems many were trying to hide for similar reasons. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps....."Perhaps" is a very sad word when repeated in such contexts.

About a year later, another young man died tragically; he was 19 years old; he had committed suicide. The small-town community was completely stunned; he was from a well-to-do and well-known family, pillars of the town. He was a popular student, a star on the football field and basketball court, and socially engaged in the community; everything was going for him. It seemed like no one saw his death coming, and the grief was jarring and deep. I did not preside over the funeral but helped the local priest with some of the worship service planning (as much as Catholics are allowed to have Non-Catholic pastors do). Again, it was a huge service, held in the local high-school gymnasium with standing room only; again, it was a two-hour-long service. What stood out to me, and possibly everyone else who was there, was a special moment carved out in the service for the family to formally address the congregation; what stood out was what was said. The father was the first to speak, and he started by saying something I did not expect - he said, "I believe my son would still be alive today if he hadn't been drinking alcohol." He went on to describe his son's struggle with addiction, the challenges to the family, the work that had gone into journeying with him as he sought recovery, the ups and the downs - in other words, he did not hide the fact of his son's alcoholism. He let the community know the truth about what happened, a truth that was raw and personal and devastating and down-to-the-bone as it were, but not something to hide in pretense that his son was anything less than fully human. To connect this with our passage, he had put honest flesh on his son's bones. That service ended with an amazing grace about the congregation's embrace of that family (and I'm not talking about the hymn); their honesty did not have anyone vilify their son any further, but rather increased their compassion for him and his struggle; the family's honesty also helped everyone to understand how fragile life

is, and that the strength of a community is really only known by dwelling together in the valley of truth even if there be dry bones all over the place. It is only then that healing may truly begin.

The deaths of these two young people came to my mind as I read this passage from Ezekiel, which is of course pretty well known. It has to do with how we deal with death in its many forms (that is, not just physical death), and the extremes we sometimes go to in order to either soften the blow or engage it directly. One family sought to cover things up; the other sought to bring everything into the light of community awareness. Only the second family had the potential to truly move on. This brings us to the point of our scripture passage today - how to move on from any valley of dry bones we find ourselves in, how to move on from death, physical or otherwise.

Ezekiel's vision starts with him being taken to a valley filled with dry bones; the imagery is impossible to miss. The vision signifies the facing of death in all its forms -- hopelessness and despair, destruction and emptiness, suffering and pain, grief and loss. It's the place all humans find themselves at some time or other in their lives, perhaps many times in their lives, when darkness overwhelms life with its impenetrable veil. It happens on individual levels and corporate levels, such as nation or culture. Ezekiel is taken to this place of death, and God asks a question; he says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel tried to take the easy way out and handed the question right back to God when he answered, "O Lord God, you know." But then, God doesn't let him off the hook; God says to Ezekiel "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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." In other words, speak my life to these dead bones, and watch impossibly new life form.

Please note the significance of the order of things here: God doesn't act until Ezekiel does.

Speak my life to dead things, says God to Ezekiel; prophesy my will to a dead nation, says God to Ezekiel. That's how your people move on; that's how you can travel through any valley of the shadow of death; that's how you deal with dry bones. Speak my life to dead things; speak my hope when none can be seen; speak my life when your life falters.

Can you hear God saying the same thing to us today? In the midst of all the things that speak of death, the valley of dry bones we find ourselves living in these days, God says speak his life into the midst of it all. The dry bones of today need no retelling - warfare and violence are the everyday news, lying and deceit the everyday speech, hostility the everyday tone. Our world is a big hot mess - and is getting messier everyday.

Speak into it all, says God; speak my words of life. Speak with your words, speak with your life, speak with your love, speak with all the gifts I give to you to be used. Prophecy that, no matter how horrible things have become, no matter how dry the bones are, no matter how many bones there are, bones can be refleshed (I think that's a new word I created?), death can be thwarted, and new life may impossibly rise if God is on the job.

And God is always on the job.

We're not at Easter yet, but we can see its shadow on the horizon before us. We know that new life is God's main business, and that our God insists on never giving up on the human project. But Lent is the journey towards what we have yet to embrace in terms of the storm before the calm when death is everywhere including the cross. It is a place of lostness and confusion, of tension and fear that would undo us if we were left to our own. But God speaks to us in this place of shadow just like he spoke to Ezekiel back then - prophecy the truth of God, speak the grace of the Spirit, and live the love of Jesus when all seems to have gone to hell. Speak into the whirlwind a stubborn belief that God is still at work, and prove it by letting God work through you as Jesus showed us how. God is still at work - and he does his best work when we heed his call.

I read something in the Christian Century that puts all this in a simple mission statement that I love. Rev. Christopher Carter is pastor of Fairview Christian Church in Lynchburg, Virginia; Lynchburg is known nationally as the home of Jerry Falwell's Liberty University, a paragon of ultra-conservative sentiment (think MAGA on steroids). But Fairview Christian Church represents the opposite sentiment, insisting on the sacredness of all people, the embrace of diversity, and the following of Jesus in all ways possible. Their church has a mission statement that encompasses God's counsel to Ezekiel on how to move on through the valley of dry bones. "Love God, Love People, and Prove it." That's how we move on, people of God, through this present valley of shadow - "Love God, love people, and prove it." May we each provide the proof of our love to a world of dry bones awaiting God's refleshing.