

Ridiculous Hope
Ezekiel 37 and John 11
March 26, 2023

Intro: Grief and Despair

If you listened to the two scripture texts this morning and thought, “Ugh...that’s a lot...and a little too close to home.” I don’t blame you. I confess to procrasti-baking and then stress eating in the face of them. And given my family story - and the stories of many within this congregation - I have to begin by telling you that someone coming back to life after dying is not the normal way that the world works. And that is not because God loves Lazarus more than God loved my brother or your loved one or you. And if you need to talk about that please please come to me. This story is a mystery - and mystery can stir up our wonder and curiosity and awe. But it can also stir up pain.

And these scriptures are full of pain. They are simply drowning in grief and despair. We have the story of Mary and Martha who are overwhelmed with sadness and anger at the death of their brother. And the prophet Ezekiel who is bearing the anguish of an entire nation who feels so cut off from God, that they are like dry bones wasting in the wilderness.

It is no small thing to wade into those deep, complex, heartbreaking emotions. Many of us would rather turn away - even when the grief is our own. To engage it would be too much. And yet the scriptures make space for it. They do not shy away from the difficulty. They do not skip over the sadness and hurt. The writer of John spends 40 verses on the grieving and only 4 on Lazarus’ raising.

I find great comfort in the reality that scripture holds space for a full range of emotion - giving us freedom to hold that space for ourselves and one another as well. Is there any more raw or honest admonishment in all of the Bible than, “Jesus if you had been here, my brother wouldn’t have died.” The Bible makes space for all of our emotions - we don’t have to squelch them - and we need that reminder.

But there is more - In both scriptures we see a God who is fully engaged with the very real hurts of this world. Whether those hurts are shared by an entire community - or are the very personal pain of sisters who have lost their brother. God is present in the grief and despair.

When Jesus comes to the tomb of Lazarus he weeps. Publicly. He does not pull away on his own - he weeps right where he is. He weeps for his friend who has died. He weeps for Mary and Martha who are hurting. And I believe he weeps for himself - for the reality that he cannot stop death. That part of the essence of humanity is mortality. And so part of the truth of incarnation is mortality. Jesus cannot stop death. Or pain or grief. And he weeps for it - and for us. He weeps because of it - he feels his own personal grief.

The grief in Ezekiel is more corporate - but even that can feel personal, sometimes. The people of Israel are in exile...taken from their homes - from everything that is familiar to them. Taken from the place where they believe God lives and breathes and works with them. They are despairing. All around there is pain and desolation. Everything feels

broken and confusing. It feels like God is not with them. It feels like full and abundant life is not possible for them. How in the world are they going to make it?

Maybe you are familiar with that kind of despair. Maybe you look around at a world full of easily recognizable dry bones. You can point to the climate crisis or escalating tensions with China or the war in Ukraine. Perhaps you see the way systemic racism plagues us. Or the increasing legislation intent on limiting the full and abundant living of our siblings who are gay or trans. Or perhaps it is the treatment of the disabled that bothers you. Or the deep divisions within our nation or within Christianity. Or simply the collective effects of 3 years of trauma because of COVID. How in the world are we going to make it?

“The good news for us is that God doesn’t seem as interested in that question,” writes Rev. Danielle Shroyer. “The question God has for Ezekiel is something else entirely: “*Can these bones live?*”

God doesn’t ask if it’s likely, or if the forecast looks promising. God doesn’t ask for pie charts and percentages. And, perhaps best of all, God doesn’t say, “Do you know how you’re going to get out of this?”

Because God knows, Ezekiel feels just as overwhelmed by that question as we would.

God asks: “Can these bones live?”

This is a question not of probability, but possibility.

What God wants to know is: “Can you see past the rubbish, the damage, the crisis, the violence, the signs of decay...and can you imagine that life still lingers there? Do you dare to believe—and even trust—that the power of life does not ever go underground in such a way that God cannot revive it?”

The invitation of these scriptures is to hope. To dare to see new life, even when we can’t quite get our hands on it yet. To believe and believe even when we cannot fully see.

Now I know the parts of myself that feel like hope can be flimsy and ephemeral and more likely to slip through my fingers than stick to my bones. But I am learning that choosing hope - choosing it - planting my feet solidly within it is incredibly powerful - and empowering. It may be ridiculous - and it is certainly counter cultural and may get us mocked - but the truth is hope is powerful.

People who hold tightly to power know this. It’s why empire’s tamp it out at every turn. Hope is powerful. The Babylonians want the Israelites who are in Exile to despair - they become a problem if they begin to hope for new life. The Roman empire want Jews and followers of Jesus alike to feel resigned to life with them in power - and the move to kill Jesus will begin in response to the hope that comes when Lazarus is raised to new life. Hope is powerful. And a people living in hope - hope of abundance and new life and freedom - that is a powerful people. A dangerous people, even. People who hope, transform the world.

And so the question remains - can you see it? Can you see new life in places where there seems to only be grief or pain or loss or division or despair? Can you choose hope - for

yourself? For that person you disagree with? For the church? For our nation? For the world?

Conclusion

Sarah Are Speed responds to the question in a poem. And her title matters. It's called: The answer is yes.

It's the question we ask at the end of our rope,
when the storm is raging,
when the monsters under the bed have introduced themselves.
When everything around us seems to be on fire.
It's the question we ask when hope slips through like sand in a bottle,
when the mockingbirds stop singing,
when the news reporter leads with another mass shooting.
It's the question we ask when the depression moves in,
making herself at home, making a mess of it all.
It's the question we ask
when we're not sure if Easter will come.
Will it be Lent forever?
Will the sun ever rise?
Will this hope lead to something?
Can these bones ever live?

I Believe

Epilogue

We cannot leave these texts without noting the participation and community inherent in the hope - it is necessary to not only choose hope as an attitude and posture toward the world - but also to participate in the new life you hope unfolds all around us. Lazarus is told to walk out of the tomb- to physically move toward new life. Jesus does not do it for him. Ezekiel is the one who is told to prophesy - he is required to use his powerful voice to cast the vision. God invites us to share in the work of our transformation. But it's not just an individual transformation.

The story of the dry bones in the valley is a story in which the whole community comes to new life - not just Ezekiel. God breathes life into all the people. It is a community oriented resurrection. And when Lazarus steps forth from the tomb - Jesus tells the *community* to unbind him - to set him free. Everyone engages in the work of resurrection, of new life. We participate in the new life we hope for. And we live into that hope in community. We need each other. We hope together, we work together, we bring new life together.

It is a pretty ridiculous hope. But it's also a beautiful one. You and me and us - with all of our big emotions and deep flaws - our grief and despair - our loss and our division - choosing together to see new life all around - pointing it out to each other when our vision gets clouded by the dry bones. Choosing to live into growth. To love our way into

wholeness. To vulnerably and compassionately engage in the work of justice and peace. To plant ourselves firmly in dangerous, tenacious, renewing, life-giving hope.

May we see it...and live it...and be it...together...

Amen

Beyond a Dying Sun

Benediction

You will find the poem by Lauren Seganos Cohen on the insert in your bulletin - it is a poem that was created through spending time reading and listening to the scripture text from John to see what words from it might bubble up as important - and then crossing out the words that didn't hold as much weight for this moment. In so doing - Lauren has given us a vision of who we are, how we might see each other and ourselves, and a call to live into that vision with hope. Hear her words as a blessing and a sending:

Friends, sisters, brother,

You are miracles

Come out!

And be free.

Amen