

## Restoration

Both of these passages from our scriptures carry very powerful images about life and death within them. That scene of an entire valley floor covered with dry bones which probably to Ezekiel must have represented the remains from a great battle where suddenly those bones came to life is dramatic, but really so is the suspenseful scene where a body wrapped in grave cloths for four days is seen emerging from that tomb—still in the grave cloths which had been used to wrap the body four long days ago. Both images have been used frequently as the material for tales of horror in books and movies as well as numerous video games. People seem fascinated by this concept of those thought to be dead being brought back to life—and the possibilities of life their being life found in bodies obviously dead. We are still in what seems is being called the most Lenten, Lenten journey that we have been called to make. Facebook is full of memes complaining about how much folks feel they are not being called to “give up for Lent” this season. We might more profitably spend this time considering ways that we can make deeper connections, build better and stronger relationships based on the values taught along the way so we can witness better to the community of caring disciples we are called to be. In this time that we cannot congregate, it might be helpful to remember that Jesus did not call his disciples to build buildings but to go into the world carrying a message of love and witnessing to that love by the care they showed for one another. In this Lenten journey to Jerusalem and the beginning of Holy Week with Palm Sunday as it is often called next Sunday, our thoughts often make the association of these two texts with the events which come at the end of Holy Week, Easter Sunday. That seems to always be our preference, to move from the idea of the triumphal entry depicted in the gospels to discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning. We like celebrations. Yet we are not at either of those points yet in this Lenten journey. In fact, these readings are not about resurrection at all. They are about something that may be related, but is actually quite different. They are about restoration. They are about healing. They are about being made whole. They are about the present, not about a future reward but about a current hope. There is a connection to the idea of resurrection because there is no doubt at all that both narratives are concerned with a type of death and the meaning and consequences surrounding it. Let’s begin with the passage which records the vision given to the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a Levite, a priest who had witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. At the time of this vision, he had been taken to live in exile in Babylon. So when this vision begins, what is depicted is the reality which he has seen. The leaders and people of Israel have broken their covenant and their relationship with the Lord. This has brought about a vast destruction of the people and nation of Israel—its brokenness and apparent death is represented by this valley of bones which are very dry. Despite the fact that he and the others are actually still living in exile, they have not reformed a relationship with God; they have not turned to God; they are these dry bones. This vision is a scene out of a nightmare. An unnamed valley stuffed full of bones, even if they are “very dry” cannot be a place that one would want to be. That they are very dry means that they have been there a long time. The very last thing that would occur to anyone gazing on such a scene would be their potential to be anything other than signs of past life and present death. Nevertheless, the question God asks the prophet is: “Mortal, can these bones live?” The question is absurd on its face; many things may be thought about dry bones but the possibility

of their coming back to life is hardly one of them. And Ezekiel's response to the ridiculous question is appropriately ambiguous: "O Lord God, you know." This answer which is actually not an answer may be heard in several ways: "God, only you know, since as far as I am concerned dry bones are not going to pop back to life. Or if they do, I would rather not be here to see it!" Or, "Alternatively, If you, God, ask a foolish question like that, then I give you the opportunity to answer it, since my experience of dry bones says that dry bones are just dead. Life is inconsistent with dry bones." But God will not let the prophet evade the question. God then tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones; to hear the word of the Lord. Ezekiel is asked to stand up in a valley chock full of desiccated bones and preach a sermon to them! What a wonderful opportunity! And he does just that. In many ways if we look back to earlier chapters, this is what Ezekiel's call has been from the beginning. While they were still in Jerusalem, he was called to give the word of the Lord to a people who did not listen. Those who did not listen then are now those whose bones fill the valley. Now he is again called to bring the word of the Lord to them as they reside in exile. God gives Ezekiel the word he is to bring, and Ezekiel obeys. "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." At this point, the valley is no longer full of dry bones, but despite being assemble neither is there life because there is no breath in them. The final step has yet to be taken. This assemblage has the appearance of life, but not the reality. So God commands again: "Prophecy 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." Notice how the winds bring the breath which brings life. In Hebrew, this is one word: *ruach*. This Hebrew word also means Spirit. Back in Genesis, it was God's breathing into that dirt which gave live to Adam. Here it is the *ruach* brought by the four winds which breathes life into this multitude. Finally, as the text ends, Ezekiel is given one more word from the Lord to give to the exiled people. It is a promise: "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." God tells Ezekiel he still has a plan and purpose for the people of Israel, that the plan includes a future in the ancient land of Israel. God is true to his promise. The people are allowed to return, although that restoration does not go according to the plans that they make. In many ways, the people also never become whole again because they never fully accept being obedient covenant people; the life giving spirit does not fully dwell within mending the brokenness of their society. But, the reality of why we read this text on our Lenten journey is not because of what it tells us about the history of Israel, but what it tells us about US. We read it today because each of us, like all mortals as we are termed in this passage, we will face our own *figurative* valley of the dry bones. I think that in some ways this particular Lenten season has brought this reality to many, if not most of

us in the form of a virus—a particle too small to be seen even with most microscopes. We have been forced to alter our normal ways of thinking about almost every aspect of our daily lives—in some ways those ways are “dead” to us now. We have been told to “socially distance” ourselves, which really means to establish physical distance. We are being asked to consider how are actions affect others...to consider the space between us...not to think first of our own self...As I reflect on the comments I see about these requests and the responses to them, I cannot help but put them in the context of the valley of dry bones...our dry bones of selfishness. Our dry bones where we who claim to be followers of Jesus allow people to be marginalized daily we seem to have a valley of dry bones to face. When we are called to face the reality of how we have allowed indifference to marginalization, to a lack of health care for many; to the income disparity to increase; to see many of the things which Ezekiel proclaimed as the word of God to the people of Israel before their exile present in our own society...That we have a valley of dry bones to face is a hard admission. We can turn away. We can turn inward. Or we can confess and face the reality that we need to ask for the restoration that God offers...the coming of the breath of life brought through the Holy Spirit. In Ezekiel’s bizarre dry bone story, the bones live not because they are resourceful or clever bones (finding a cure-vaccine or miracle drug). They come to life not because they will themselves to live, not anything in the bones themselves. What gives life is that word, that wisdom, that spirit from beyond self. Easter is still on the other side of this Lent, as it is on the other side eternally. Easter is God’s enacted declaration that the end of the story is not, after all death. The last word is life. But Ezekiel’s strange dry bones story is not about life after death, but about life before death. It’s the promise that by the power of God-with-us, this life, this here-and-now-life can be full and abundant. It is the call for us to remember that. It is the call for us to witness to that. It is the call for us to live into the teachings to be a loving, caring bound together community of faith that reaches out—remaining connected even at a distance—knowing that our relationship with our Lord and with each other cannot be broken. Thanks be to God.