

March 26, 2023 Fifth Sunday in Lent

Pr. Laurie Lynn Newman

Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:1-45

St. Andrew Lutheran, Beaverton

Dancing from Dry Bones

When I was a kid, my summers in East Tennessee included week at Christian Service camp. Highlights were the campfire songs, hikes in the forest, candy at the canteen, swimming in a beautiful pool, and daily competitions around memorizing scripture. You'd get a point for every verse memorized, regardless of the length of the verse. The famous, favorite passage, was in our Gospel lesson today. Jesus was moved by the sisters' grief for their brother, Lazarus, and his own grief. The verse was: "Jesus wept."

It's a short verse, easy to remember. More importantly, it's one of the most powerful statements in the Bible. Jesus knew love, and grief, just as we do. This simple statement about Jesus' weeping, plus the images in Ezekiel, of the dry bones, scattered across Death Valley, transformed by the breath of God into an alive, new people--Somehow these passages on death, loss, grief and new life—are perfectly timed for us.

If you've seen the photos of the devastation across the Mississippi Delta, after yesterday's hour long tornado, you can feel visceral impact of the valley of the dry bones.

The culture of Ezekiel's world of Israelites exiled in Babylonia, and our own violent and polarized culture, is revealed through this passage. We were created by God, given the breath of life to thrive and love, but at times we are dry bones-- picked clean by a culture intent on death for many, rather than life for all. We live in a death-dealing culture.

Today, can these bones live?

This week, deaths of two migrants, suffocated in a train car, in Ulvade County, Texas, we wonder: Can these bones live?

With the grim report last week from the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, finding that by the 2030s, the world is likely to have warmed since the preindustrial time, by 2.7 degrees Fahrenheit (1.5 degrees Celsius), missing the climate target that had been set. We wonder: Can these bones live?

And, we feel grief around loss. We look back at a time when churches had more members. More children were present, and we weren't worried about pandemic. We look back to when Pastor Mark and Donna, and Pastor Robin, and Pastor Susan were here, and things were more settled. We look back to the time pre-divorce, pre-breakup, and before the death of a loved one. We miss people that we love.

When we feel that dryness of spirit, we wonder: Can these bones live?

Do you remember the Portland cartoonist, Matt Groenig? (He created the Simpsons). In his wry humor, he captures the death-dealing attitudes, bent on perfectionism, and harsh judgment. *Life in Hell* had this gem: "The sooner you face up to the fact that you are lazy,

untalented losers, unfit to kiss the feet of a genius like Friedrich Nietzsche, the better off you'll be. . .”

Our world is thirsty for hope, for grace, for life.

The allegory of the dry bones, scattered in the valley of defeat, grips us today, because, what seemed dead, insurmountable and overwhelming – is shaken up, reassembled, covered with sinew and muscle and skin, and filled *ruach* -- the breath of life. A multitude of bones rise, and move and sway with life, a dancing reminder of God with us.

Yes, sometimes the church is wrong. When we've excluded others on the basis of sexual orientation, or race or ability, or age. When we've focused too narrowly on maintaining the status quo, and missed the call to work for justice. But, at its best, the church's work is offering life in the midst of a death-dealing culture.

How does the church, how do we at St. Andrew, offer life and grace in a time such as this?

Last year, St. Andrew did important work together on the Horizon discernment. At the center of that discernment-- is welcoming a spirit of renewal. We hope that renewal will be evident as we commit to these actions:

Vibrant worship together;

Action for social justice;

Deepened intergenerational community;

and expanded diversity.

Did you notice that all these actions are about our work together? We are joined toe bone to foot bone to ankle bone, to knee bone, to thigh bone to hip bone. . .And moved by the breath of God.

The church is one of the very few places in our society, where we can know others of different ages, backgrounds, and experiences, reflect on our purpose and meaning together. Serve the broader world together. It's a place where there is need for commitment of volunteers and financial pledging to keep about the good work of God in the world. It's a place where we find comfort, and we may also find challenge to our comfort.

As I was thinking about the challenges of change, and inclusion, I remembered time spent with my grandparents, who lived in the Texas panhandle. I was a student at Phillips University, in Enid, Oklahoma. It was too far a distance to my home in Grand Junction, Colorado to go home at every holiday, so I spent time with Grandpa Archie and Grandma Jean. I loved spending time with my talented Grandma. She was a self-taught engineer, a creative quilter, seamstress and cook. She wanted to include me, but we had difficulties. I tried to help her fix and serve dinner. But, she had a very exact way of preparing and serving the food. I put out too much bread. I couldn't find the right utensils. I was a waster of food, compared to her depression-era, frugal, sensibilities. (Her kitchen pipes had quit working, for lack of use, as she

did all of her dishes in a dish tub, saving the dish water to water her plants outside.) I knew that she wanted to appreciate my help. But I could feel how relieved she was when I left her kitchen alone.

One of the statements of the Horizon study is to become more diverse and welcoming. Lisa Eisenberg wrote that : “It’s not inclusion if you are inviting people to a space that you are unwilling to change.”

How are we with change?

Do we recognize the obstacles and resistance to new life?

Can these bones live?

The breath of God, ruah, is already moving through us. Can we see it?

There is no death that cannot be infused with life.

Yes, Ezekiel, --these bones can live!