

April 10, 2011 / Fifth Sunday of Lent / David L. Edwards

### **Can These Bones Live?**

Psalm 130

*O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with God is great power to redeem.*

Ezekiel 37:1-14

*God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."*

John 11:1-45

*Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.*

We have listened to two of the most fascinating and thought provoking stories in scripture--Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones and Jesus' raising Lazarus from death. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday, the beginning of Holy Week. The scripture lessons for today signal a shift in tone and message from the previous Sundays in Lent. Lent has been a time of reflection and self-examination in light of Jesus' call to discipleship. For us in this community, Lent gives us the opportunity to renew our work with the spiritual disciplines to which we committed as Covenant or Community Members. Lent has been a season for giving closer attention to our relationship with God, and what that relationship means for all the dimensions of our lives. With our readings today, however, the focus shifts from us to God, from what we do to what God does to bring new life to us and the world. We begin to hear the message of resurrection, God's power of new life.

The historical setting for the reading from Ezekiel is Israel's exile in Babylon. Ezekiel may have been among the first taken into exile (about 597 BCE). The people are being torn from their land, their homes, their beloved city of Jerusalem, and its temple. The most painful issue for Israel is not physical but spiritual. They had so identified God's presence with them where they were that they cannot imagine God's presence

with them where they are going. They feel dead inside.

God shows Ezekiel a valley strewn with human bones, maybe the site of some great military defeat. The text emphasizes the condition of the bones—they are VERY dry. From the human side, there is no life and no possibility of life. The situation is hopeless.

God asks the prophet: “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel sees the reality of the situation. Yet he also knows that the ultimate answer lies with God. God is that mysterious beyond that borders and underlies human life. Ezekiel gives a truly wise response in such situations. He honestly does not know whether or not life is possible, so he puts the matter back to God.

God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones the word of God, that breath will come and they will live once again. Ezekiel speaks, and the bones eerily rattle and join up together. Muscle and tendons and skin cover them again. Something is missing. The bodies exist, but there is no LIFE. God tells the prophet to speak to the wind, the breath, the spirit—these are all from the same Hebrew word *ruach*. And the wind comes. The breath enters the corpses and they are truly alive. The scene echoes the story of the creation of the man in Genesis 2. God makes the man out of the mud of the earth, but the man is not a “living being” (*nephesh*) until God breathes into him. It is the breath, the wind, the spirit of God that makes us really alive. This is what connects us with God.

This, says God, is what I will do for my people. They feel completely dead, utterly lost and alone. But I am not just in Jerusalem or in the temple, in this place or that place. I am with them in their exile. There is no geographical, physical, or spiritual condition that is a barrier to my presence, my spirit.

This is a resurrection story. Resurrection is not just a New Testament thing. God who raised Jesus from death also breathed hope and new life into Israel even in exile. God's spirit of life is not limited by any circumstance we face as individuals, a community of faith, a nation, or world. The story reminds us of the God beyond our limited vision and assessment of things, the God whose breath is always ready to come into us again. And so we can learn, when faced with hopelessness, to hear the question God puts to us—“Mortal, can these bones live?” We can learn the wisdom of Ezekiel's answer: “O God, you know.” You see, faith is precisely NOT KNOWING. It is the

honest and humble awareness that we have no idea whether new life is possible or not. And so we do the only thing we can do. We keep being as faithful as we can be, knowing that we never see the whole picture. We learn to trust that word of promise and new life. It is important to accept our feelings of discouragement, even hopelessness. Faith is not about being in denial. It is not about looking at that valley fully of bones and saying, Oh, it's not so bad! Or, well, it does look pretty bad, but everything is going to be okay! No. Faith includes and embraces our experiences of hopelessness. Yet, faith is remaining open to what we do not know. "O God, you alone know." We do not collapse into despair, nor do we sail into a false optimism. We face the reality of our situation and learn to wait for a new wind of God's spirit. That is what the psalmist meant: My soul waits for God, more than those who watch for the morning. Learning to wait with openness toward God is a central part of the life of faith.

Then there is John's story of Jesus and his dying friend Lazarus. To me, the most interesting part of the story is the way Jesus responds throughout the story. Jesus is in no hurry when he is told that his friend is dying. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are Jesus' dearest friends. Lazarus is dying and Jesus can do something about it. What does he do? The text says that though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, when he was told that Lazarus was seriously ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. Not only does Jesus stay two more days where he is but he also tells the disciples that they are going to take a little side trip to Judea. Then, while his disciples are trying to talk him out of going to Judea, where they think there will be trouble and danger, Jesus inexplicably changes his mind again. "Let's go to Bethany after all because our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going wake him up." The disciples don't get it. Why does Jesus have to go to Bethany in order to wake Lazarus up? Doesn't Lazarus have an alarm clock? Jesus was talking about Lazarus' death, which somehow he knows has happened. The disciples are as bewildered as we are about Jesus' figures of speech and what Jesus is up to.

Jesus arrives at the scene four days after Lazarus' death. Martha rushes out to Jesus. Lord, if you had been here sooner you could have done something! You can sense her irritation, if not desperation. But that's okay, she says. I know you can do something about it now.

Then Mary rushes out to Jesus. So do some of the family's friends who have gathered in support. Everyone is upset and weeping. Jesus arrives at the tomb, and is finally overcome by his own and others' grief. "Jesus wept" just doesn't get it. The literal meaning is "break down in tears," that moment when you just cannot hold it in any longer. Here Jesus is one with us in our grief, our feelings of being overcome by the heart-breaking experiences and circumstances of life. Jesus is like the psalmist who cries out of the depths. There may be something else here. Looking at the tomb of his friend, the reality of death, maybe Jesus is seeing his own death. Maybe his grief for Lazarus includes his grief over his own mortality and the kind of death that lies ahead. We are like that, too. Our grief about someone's death or illness or predicament can touch our grief about our own lives. Jesus shares all of that.

Jesus, like Ezekiel, speaks to the bones, cries out to the dead man. And out comes Lazarus, smelly grave clothes and all. Jesus tells them to "unbind him and let him go."

What strikes me about all this is Jesus' lack of urgency, his taking his time coming to Bethany. He is on a very different wavelength. He is focused on the work he has to do. Maybe that is why he stays where he is for two more days and then wants to go to Judea. He has this "let the dead bury the dead" attitude. To him there seems to be something more real and powerful than death. Jesus has this awareness the life we live is shot through with another Life. And it is that Life that is most important. It is life infused with the spirit of God, the spirit that works in every situation to bring new life, the spirit that can make something out of the chaos we experience. Jesus lived as one who trusted that deeper reality and calls us to do so as well.

As we work with our spiritual journeys, we grow in awareness of ourselves as those into whom God breathes the breath, the spirit of life. We are physical beings who LIVE by the spirit, the breath of God. Therefore, we are able to wait with hope and live without anxiety. We can be faithful to what God is calling us to do, with awareness of that larger context of life—the mysterious and real power of life that envelopes us and the whole creation.

As we live the life of the spirit, learning to wait with hope, to keep open a window through which the wind, the breath of God can blow, then we are able to stay

with things, as difficult as they may be, until new life emerges. We grow in our ability to wait for and perceive the movements of God's power of resurrection. Though we may cry out from the depths, we are able to watch and wait for the dawn that will surely come.