

April 6, 2014 / 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 here 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 dramatic 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. Today's readings are a change 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. Now, 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 was among the first taken into exile (597 BCE). The people were being torn from their land, their homes, their beloved city of Jerusalem, and its temple. They had so identified God's presence with them where they were that they could not imagine God being with them where they were going. It felt like spiritual death.

In a vision, Ezekiel is taken to a valley strewn with human bones, maybe the site of some military battle. The condition of the bones is emphasized—they are VERY dry. From the human side, there is no life or possibility of life. 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 all of life. Ezekiel gives the wisest response. As to the possibility of new life, he leaves it to God. "O Lord God, you know."

God tells Ezekiel to speak to the bones. Ezekiel speaks, and the bones join together. Sinews and skin appear, yet, though the bodies exist, there is no LIFE. God tells the prophet to speak to the wind, the breath, the spirit—all from the same Hebrew word *ruach*. The wind comes, and breath enters the corpses so that they are truly alive. This story echoes the second creation story in Genesis 2. God fashions the man out of the earth, but the man is not a “living being” (*nephesh*) until God breathes into him. It is the breath, the spirit of God, that makes us fully human, connecting us with God.

This, says God, is what I will do for my people. They feel dead, utterly lost and alone. However, I am not just in Jerusalem or in the temple, in this place or that place. I am with them in their exile, anywhere and everywhere that they are, wherever and whenever they draw breath. This is the everywhere God whose spirit, whose breath gives life just when we thought there was no life.

Here I want to say a very practical word about breath and praying, how our breathing is an important, even basic, part of our whole spiritual life. Remember that breath and spirit and wind are all the same in our scriptures. Not only our physical life, but our spiritual life, our connection with God, is about breathing. When we sit or walk, mindful of our breathing, aware of our breathing in and our breathing out, we notice something happening. We begin to feel more settled, grounded, more in the present moment. When we are upset or troubled, when our thoughts and emotions have taken off in every direction of worry or fear or anxiety or grief, if we can return to our breathing, we will be led back to calmness, to solidity. This is very much a part of prayer, of our inward journey. I have come to believe firmly that our breathing is our connection to God, to God's spirit, to the spirit of life, and we do well to devote ourselves to the practice of mindful breathing as part of our prayer life.

The story of Ezekiel and the dry bones 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 when the people felt dead 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 God who is always near us and in us is also the God beyond our limited vision and assessment of things, the God whose breath is always ready to come into us again. When faced with feelings of hopelessness, we might remember God's question to Ezekiel as though God is speaking it to us—“Mortal, can these bones live?” We can learn the wisdom of Ezekiel's answer: “O God, you know.” You see, faith is not about having answers. It is not about knowing everything. 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 acknowledge our feelings of discouragement or fear or whatever it is. Faith is not about being in denial, looking at that valley full of bones and saying, Oh, it's not so bad! Neither is faith the opposite, thinking we know that the situation is hopeless or lost. Faith is having neither rosy optimism nor world-weary cynicism. Faith is remaining open to what we do not know. "O God, you alone know." 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, a very interesting part of the story is that Jesus is in no hurry when he is told that his friend is dying. Lazarus and his sisters Mary and Martha are Jesus' dear friends. Lazarus is dying and Jesus can do something about it. What does he do? The text says that 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 there but also he 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 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 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. Martha rushes out to Jesus. Lord, if you had been here sooner you could have done something! You can sense some irritation in her voice. But that's okay, she says. I know you can do something about it now. Then Mary comes out to Jesus, along with 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" or "began to weep" just doesn't get it. The literal meaning is "break down in tears," that moment when you collapse with emotion. 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. Yet, there may be something else here. Looking at the tomb of his friend, maybe Jesus is seeing his own death. Maybe his grief for Lazarus includes his grief over his own death, toward which he is moving. We are like that, too. Our grief about someone's death or illness or suffering touches our grief about our own

lives. Jesus shares all of that with us.

When Jesus orders the stone to be removed from the grave, Martha warns him that, since Lazarus has been dead four days, there will be the stench of decay. This echoes the Ezekiel story, which emphasizes the dryness of the bones. In both cases, from the human side, there is no sign of or hope for life. Like Ezekiel speaking to the bones, Jesus 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 I think about so much in this story is Jesus’ lack of urgency, his taking his time coming to Bethany. He is on a very different wavelength. He remains 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 is something more real and powerful than death. Jesus has this awareness that the life we live is shot through with another Life, the breath we breathe is filled with another Breath. 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 God’s breath in our breath, God’s life in our life. We therefore become 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, in its own way, in its own time. But it will come.