

Ezekiel: Valley of Dry Bones (10Dec17)
Ezekiel 37:1-14

We hear from 2nd Isaiah next week with the Sunday School program, but this is the last preaching on the Narrative Lectionary's sweep through the Old Testament. Then we'll be in the Gospel of John from Christmas until Easter, with the life of Jesus.

From the trajectory of this autumn, we remember back to origins, stories of progenitors, sources of family connection, in Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. That family took us ahead several hundred years to the population explosion outnumbering the Egyptians, with stories of Exodus on the way to the Promised Land, and settling to increase their institutions of government and religion. That brought us to prophets who called for reform and justice, and (at least in their suppositions) being conquered as punishment for misbehavior.

We've been in exile for three weeks now, and Isaiah next week will see a path toward home and restoration. Though I recount those details as human narrative, with people as the main characters, this is actually God's story, the account of God's ongoing goodness, God striving in God's world.

So once again, with that sweep of history, with today's reading still more than 500 years before Jesus, we repeat in the story's plot: these people weren't waiting those 500 years for the Messiah to show up, twiddling their thumbs until Christmas finally came. There are words of hope, but not with sights set on a Messiah a half millennium later.

Rather, it was simply a longing for home. Indeed, as Isaiah makes rare use of the Hebrew word for "Anointed One," the term is applied to a foreign leader. That's good to keep in mind as we're wrapping up our time with the Old

Testament. Isaiah called Cyrus a Messiah—the King of Persia, the next in the line of empires, this time to knock out the Babylonians and allow the Hebrew people to go home (45:1). That was its own moment of salvation.

With that one example, I really, really hope throughout this fall you've been hearing God's striving for the sake of the world, and investment in all circumstances of our existence. It gets it terribly wrong to claim an old god was angry or could care less, so we were waiting for the nice and loving Jesus to bring a divine alternative. There aren't two different gods. The God embodied by Jesus is thoroughly and absolutely the God encountering us in the faithful probing of these Old Testament accounts.

Yet, just as this God shows up in hidden and surprising ways—like as a baby and on the cross—God tends to work without blatant and apparent showmanship. The promise seems inevitably paired with doubt, the expectancy amid darkness, God's blessing where we have all but given up hope succumbing to despair.

So as Ezekiel set his eyes toward God's vision and the hopes of home, he saw only a dead end. A very honest dead ending. A valley of bones. An abandoned cemetery. The entire family tribe, lifeless and piled in a heap. Ezekiel had begun to figure there was no way out of exile, no return to the life they had known, no possibility for the future.

With that, besides the overall trajectory of the Old Testament story, I also notice a smaller trajectory—the arc of your life—in three of four weeks of these readings.

The first was Isaiah declaring hope in the gift of birth: "unto us a child is born." Whether Hezekiah or baby Jesus or the young ones around us, or yourself in youth, there was a promise of God's possibilities and blessing simply in that fragile existence, in the

imperfection of not knowing what lay ahead, in small capabilities, yet with God's care and potential with the birth of a baby.

The following week, Jeremiah moved to the middle of life. Even in captivity under a hostile government, when life was far from what people wanted, still the word of the Lord for the exiles was to build houses, to make their gardens grow, to celebrate marriages. You know, the regular sort of stuff that has kept you busy most of the time since you were born. The stuff you'll go back to doing this afternoon, and maybe more seriously when the alarm clock goes off tomorrow morning. It's the stuff of sustaining relationships and tending your spot amid creation, which often involves vacuuming it (as we're stuck with typically un-thrilling aspects of the not-so-showy God). And it means not pretending you can escape to some utopia, but striving in the place where you are, simply since it's not perfect.

So we had the start of life, the rest of life, and with Ezekiel come to life's end, or to be precise, beyond the end.

That God's concern for and potential in a baby would be a surprise may take a little extra pause for us to appreciate, to remember infant mortality rates and the insignificance on a scale where 255 babies are born onto this planet every minute. But in such small ways, God's work persists.

And continuing for unspectacular daily lives, God sees potential. That doesn't mean you could really make something of your life, that you could go on to win a Nobel prize or be a volunteer of the year for some organization or have your picture in the news as a hero. Rather, God is invested in your daily life as it already is, at home and at work and in your family and at the grocery store. God isn't waiting for something to change, but trusts the potential with you right now.

Okay. So it's fine that God sees what's possible in the birth of a baby. It may even be realistic that God would find potential in the course of your life, even up to your dying breath.

But once you're dead, could God really be seeing any potential then? Isn't it too late? Relationships over? Isn't death the point where all that's left is to go through their clothes and look for loose change, as they said in *The Princess Bride*? Or for science and the conservation of matter, how your elements are recycled, not just as worm food, as Luther liked to point out, but returning to the soil and becoming crops that go on to feed the hungry? Is that all? Could God possibly plan more of you than that?

That hard language may well be considered morbid. Most of our discussion of death doesn't really look at it, but euphemizes and ignores, and we say we lost someone or they passed and try to whitewash over how terribly terminal and critically fracturing death has been. There is nothing more to say or do about it. It is ultimate. Sad. Final.

Except not for our God. God will be stopped by no dead ends. Hope will not be overcome, ever. Death is not final. These dry bones will live. They have potential and a future. And so will you.

In Ezekiel, this is brought about by a sermon (or actually three sermons, if you like). Ezekiel preaches to those bones, offering them God's word. Well, God has a word for you, too. Though none of you today are in the exact physical circumstance of Ezekiel's sermon—none of you are dead, dry bones—you may either factually or figuratively find yourselves at any of these points in life—young, fresh with potential. Amid the flow and mid-stages and regular rhythms. At terminations where things look worse than bleak and all seems lost.

Throughout, the sermon is that God is relentlessly filling you with life for God's purposes.

In what to me is an utterly astonishing faithful declaration, this is an assurance that with every breath, God is renewing and refilling you, recreating goodness in you. It's been a few weeks since we've done any Hebrew, so here's

another good one for you: *רוּחַ ruach*. It means wind and breath and Spirit. And with this from Ezekiel, as you are filled with each breath, it is God's Spirit filling you. In respiration you are inspired; you are re-Spirited as the Spirit is put into you over and over. And even when you expire, even when you breathe out and breathe your last, still God will call for breath to fill and renew you yet again.

I started out saying that the prophets weren't predicting Jesus. But we should still most definitely see their vision of God directly embodied in Jesus. With life to dry bones and the Holy Spirit that will take victory from death, probably our clearest understanding is in Jesus and the empty tomb, that the forces of enemies and powers of death were defeated, not only once, but for all. Even amid the season of Advent, even as we aren't ourselves today facing death and the grave, even as we may be closer to birth, still this is always an Easter faith, always with its soul in the hope of resurrection, from birth, through life, and beyond death. We don't need to and we shouldn't pretend like we can't talk about that as we're getting ready for Christmas. That is the overall shape of our story, the fullness. Though it remains so totally unclear and prone to doubt and without visions of grandeur, with our God who shuns glitzy showmanship, still we know the ending. The end, finally, is life.

And though it risks confining that message and not allowing you to live into the full expanse, I want to tag on a word about Israel

and Palestine for these days. Ezekiel's people were captive under empire. Mary and Joseph were captive under empire. Again this week, we were reminded of the violent claims to power by an occupying empire. Even as our siblings at Christmas Lutheran in Bethlehem are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, they are left more and more with a reality of the valley of dry bones, as people confined by razor-wired walls and the dead end of life. As our President worsened the obstacles on the path to peace this week by shortsighted and single-minded declarations on Jerusalem, this reminds us that the word out from death, a word of hope and the breath of life still needs to stir in us all, of a God who understands our weakness, who comes to inspire and to break down barricades, who will not be confined. Our God remains against all that would kill or remove life. The point of our story is not just to look back to one who was coming, but to see that the God of Jesus still comes into our midst and our troubled world now, with every breath, for the sake of life.