

Today we are hearing God's word to us from the prophet Ezekiel. You will recall that Ezekiel is a Levite, a priest that is responsible for the care of the temple and he is now in exile with the people of Israel following a season of violence and destruction which included the defilement of the temple. So much about Ezekiel's role as a priest has changed and much about the circumstances of life have changed, from a people settled in their land with a temple housing their God, to now a people in exile and a destroyed temple. This is where we pick up the story today with God and Ezekiel in what is commonly known as the Valley of Dry Bones. Let us hear God's word to us on this day of Pentecost from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37, verses 1-14:

Ezekiel says, "The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴ Then God said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath^[a] to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath^[b] in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then God said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy,

mortal, and say to the breath:^[c] Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,^[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰ I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ Then God said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ 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.”

This is the word of God for the people of God...thanks be to God.

It is Pentecost the day in which we are reminded of the gift of the Holy Spirit to us, the people of God, the church, and today we meet a people whose lives have been turned upside down in some of the most brutal and dramatic ways, a people who have been exiled to a foreign land, who have had violence enacted upon them, who have buried their loved ones, and who are lost and without hope. And, today they are given a prophetic word and so are we.

As a Levite Ezekiel would have avoided interaction with the dead, in Leviticus 21 the priestly rules are laid out and verse 1 says, ‘None of you are allowed to make

yourselves unclean by any dead person among your community.”¹ So entering an entire valley of the dead would have been more than uncommon, it would have felt anti-religious, it would have felt like doing something that you have always been told was not allowed, something that could separate you from God permanently. But, that’s not what happened, because God was there too. In this vision of Ezekiel’s God shows up in the place that Ezekiel thought was separated from God. God joined Ezekiel in that place, in that place of death, and not only did God join Ezekiel there but God took Ezekiel on a tour around the entire valley. Showing him all that there was to see. Ezekiel did not get an aerial view of the loss and despair, Ezekiel got the up-close, intimate, down and dirty look of all that had been lost and left without life. He was so close that he could see that the bones were dried up and the sinews and tissues that had once connected them together had disappeared. He must have been wondering why it was God was wanting to show him all the destruction and death that he had lived firsthand in exile.

As we think about our lives today, our personal lives, the lives we live together in this faith community, and the world around us, there are many places we might identify as just as dry and dead. There are many places we could name as beyond repair, seemingly beyond any hope for restoration. What might we name? the resurgence of mass shootings over the past few months. COVID. Israel/Palestine. Housing insecurity. Scarcity mindset. Depression. Vaccine scarcity in some countries. Lack of mental health care. The death of someone we love. Abusive relationships. Border issues. Refugees.

¹ CEB translation

Exclusion from the church. There are many more. It is hard to have hope when there is so much death and destruction.

And, God chose that place, the place that was filled with nothing but death to invite Ezekiel to prophesy on God's behalf, God invites Ezekiel to call upon God and the breath of God to bring about restoration and new life, where restoration and new life seem impossible.

We all have our valleys. We all have our places individually and communally that we experience a loss of hope, where we experience death to the point that we cannot even fathom life could be restored, and God meets us there, too. Asking us the same question that God asked Ezekiel, can these dry bones live again? Ezekiel, who had previously prophesied judgement on the people is now prophesying new life.

The restoration that happens in this story, the command to prophesy, the prophesying, the enacting of new life, the bringing back together, it all happens with God, with the Spirit, it does not happen alone. God, we trust, could have done all this work of restoration on God's own, but God does not choose that path, God invites us, humans, in this case Ezekiel, to use his voice, and prophesy to the places of death in our midst, so that new life can be drawn from the four winds, so that hope can be restored.

God draws the breath from the four winds, Ezekiel commands the spirit to be pulled into their bodies from distances near and far, inviting us to consider is there any place that the breath of God does not reach? The same breath that has since found its way into each of us, extending the same invitation to new life.

We are invited into relationship with God not to receive the spirit and give thanks alone.

We are invited to enact God's restoration on the world, to bring about new life and create restored life for all people through the Spirit of God that dwells in each of us.

In this year that has felt like a vast valley of death, where so much has been lost and so much has left us hopeless there is new life springing up, there is restoration to be seen and experienced and lived into. We can try to resist it but God has a powerful way of turning death to life, in spite of humanity, of resurrecting that which we would have called beyond dead.

This story, and the story from acts, are reminders that there is hope where we least expect it, that when we say it's impossible God shows us a new way, it is a call to believe in the possibilities of restoration and resurrection, in healing and wholeness, for us, and for all of God's people. It is an invitation to actively participate in that healing and wholeness, in the life giving work of living as children of God abiding in the love of Christ, and giving witness to the life of Christ each day of our own lives. That is the story of Eastertide and it is the invitation of Pentecost. We are given the spirit so that the life of Christ may continue to have impact on the world, so that when we see dry bones we

trust, we believe, we are assured that new life is possible and that God uses us to bring it to be.

Even in this year we have experienced new life. Surely you've seen it too. It's the moments that will nearly bring you to tears, almost unexpectedly because we have gotten so accustomed to the death. I have seen groups focus on mutual aid where before they have been focused solely on their own fundraising, I have seen people volunteering at vaccine sites, I have seen people chalking driveways to share love, I have seen urban farms popping up, I have seen food drives initiated by children collecting items for their local pantries, I have seen childcare sharing when there was no childcare available, I have seen people sewing masks for one another, I have seen people cleaning their neighbors' homes and doing grocery shopping for them. I've seen the church continuing to pray for and care for one another even though it had to be done from a distance. And just this week I witnessed people caring for migrant teens in a convention center as worship leaders, communion servers, medical volunteers, fellowship volunteers, and much more. Out of death there is hope for resurrection. Out of death God provides for us restoration.

For the Levites being with the dead was considered unclean and yet God takes Ezekiel to the most unclean place, not with a singular death, but a vast multitude of death, and in that place, that place that was seen as unclean, God not only ensured Ezekiel but ensured all the people that God was with them. We too must be willing to go to the

places we have considered unclean or unsafe, or just plain uncomfortable. It is in those places where we are uncertain that God shows up in powerful, sweeping, mind-boggling ways that leave us nearly turned upside down and opens our minds to a new work, and before we know it God is sweeping us up in God's good works again, bringing hope, bringing love, to a world so desperately in need of both.

This Pentecost may we feel the spirit moving among us, may we embrace God's leading through the valley full of pain and suffering, knowing that God has not forgotten the promise of resurrection and restoration for all God's people. And, when the spirit gets a hold of us, when the spirit does its work to push us along, may we go swiftly with it, to the places that are risky, the places we've thought were too unclean for us, so that God can bring about those very things we long for, restoration, healing, saving, for the sake of us all. Oh what a joy it is to be the bearers of Christ, what a joy it is to be the bearers of the God's spirit, that mighty spirit that can be drawn in to each of us from the four winds, the very breath within us that invites us to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ in the world. What vision is God offering us for hope and restoration in this place? May we be so enlivened by the spirit that we have no choice but to follow where God is leading. That we have no choice but to prophesy to the dry bones to live once again. Amen.