

## Called to Life

Thursday night a familiar dream reappeared. In this variation I was completely dressed – thank goodness. It was Sunday – for some reason Sunday night, not Sunday morning – and a large group of people was waiting for me to preach. Unfortunately, I didn't have a sermon prepared.

I was in this building, but not exactly. Some of you may have been in the congregation, but mostly I saw unfamiliar faces. As I was frantically thinking about what I could say, a row of women stood up and walked out. A few moments later another group left. I was horrified. I was devastated. And I was indignant. How could they walk out before I even said anything?

Thankfully, I woke up before I was forced to inform the group that I had nothing to say.

And, thankfully, I do have something to say this morning. However, as I thought about these scriptures and my sermon throughout the week, it seemed as though something I wanted to say – or, perhaps, something I was supposed to say – was just out of my reach.

As I speak this morning, we'll recall events of the past – the distant biblical past and our more recent past. My prayer is that God's spirit present within us will speak to each of you through the biblical words and through – or in spite of – my words.

The scriptures we read during the season of Lent repeat every three years, so I've been thinking about what was happening three, six, and nine years ago. In March of 2020, I was wondering how in the world to be a pastor – how in the world we could be a congregation – as we began hearing about a rapidly-spreading new virus. On March 13, 2020, I started keeping a timeline of events – one that I continued through March 9, 2022.

On March 13, various agencies recommended not meeting in groups larger than 50 due to the threat of Covid-19 infection. Since our group was smaller than that, we worshipped in-person on March 15 but made some adjustments to our greeting, offering, sharing, and prayer practices. We canceled worship on March 22 and 29. I sent out at-home worship bulletins with sermons and we met on Zoom for sharing time.

Here's the entry for Sunday, March 22: 15 people met via Zoom at 10:00 with varying degrees of success regarding video and audio connection. The meeting ended abruptly soon after 10:30 because our 40-minute free session was over.

The sermon I sent out for March 29 began with these words: Life in Kansas, the U.S., and the world has changed drastically during the past weeks and months. In the midst of the grief, anxiety, fear, and anger these changes bring, we look for signs of comfort, calm, hope, and renewal. We experience the stories from Ezekiel and John in a different way than we did before. More than ever, we long for renewal, for the hope of finding new life in the midst of despair.

I wonder how you experienced those same stories today. Given that we're in the post-pandemic era. Given your personal experiences of change, of loss and grief, and of renewal during the past three years. Given our congregation's experiences of change, of loss and grief, and of renewal during the past three years.

Ezekiel and the Israelites had great cause for despair. The vision God gave to Ezekiel offered hope to people who had lost heart, who were suffering a death of the spirit, a living death in exile in a foreign land. Their temple had been destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders put in chains, their young men and women either killed or dragged off into a foreign land. Ezekiel witnessed the soul of his people gradually wither and die, becoming as lifeless as a valley of dry bones.

Mary and Martha had great cause for despair as well. Their beloved brother, Lazarus, had died. They experienced a tremendous loss.

In these biblical stories, the people freely expressed their emotions. The Israelites lamented, *Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.* They believed that their geographic location cut them off from God who lived in Jerusalem, that in Babylon they were beyond God's reach. Mary and Martha lamented Jesus' absence from them in their crisis, each one saying to him, *If you had been here, my brother would not have died.*<sup>1</sup>

When I preached on these scriptures six years ago, I told the story of my father's hospitalization due to a broken vertebra in his neck. The injury occurred while he was living in a memory care facility. No one witnessed the incident and due to his dementia, he couldn't tell anyone what happened.

I traveled to Illinois the day after Dad's accident and spent the next three nights in his hospital room, waking up with him every few hours, trying to prevent him from removing his neck brace, trying to keep him in bed until the nurses could come to assist him.

Throughout the next few days Dad kept asking where he was. My brothers and I wondered where he would go after he left the hospital. We thought he needed more care than he would receive at the place where he had been living. We pinned our hopes on the possibility that he could return to our hometown, either to the hospital or the nursing home where he had previously been living with Mom. Or maybe he could go to another facility in the area.

The next four days brought discouraging news. Medicare wouldn't cover an extended hospital stay. There was no bed available in the nursing home with Mom. One by one we checked other options off the list.

We continued to pray about Dad's situation, but what do you pray when none of the options to consider seems to be viable, when hope fades and discouragement overwhelms you?

Despair and lament are present throughout the Bible. Psalm 130 is a good example.

*LORD, I am in great trouble, so I call out to you.*

*Lord, hear my voice; listen to my prayer for help.*

*LORD, if you punished people for all their sins, no one would be left.*

*But you forgive us, so you are respected.*

The psalm then provides a glimmer of hope.

*I wait for the LORD to help me, and I trust his word.*

*I wait for the Lord to help me more than night watchmen wait for the dawn.*

The psalmist ends by encouraging others to hope as well.

*People of Israel, put your hope in the LORD because he is loving and able to save.*

*He will save Israel from all their sins.*<sup>2</sup>

Where is the hope in the stories we've read this morning? In the Old Testament scripture, God made a promise to Ezekiel that the dry bones would live. God told the prophet to speak to the bones, saying: *The LORD God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again.*<sup>3</sup> God promises not only tendons and muscle and skin, but, most importantly, God calls breath to come from the four winds and breathe into the dead bodies so they might live again.

And it happens. This breath is the spirit of God, the life-giving breath God breathed into the first human creature in the garden.

Ezekiel's vision was about the eventual return to the land of Israel of the descendants of those Jews who had been marched against their will to Babylon. The dry bones represent the sense of hopelessness that the exiles were experiencing. It seemed impossible that they would ever find their

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<sup>1</sup> John 11:21, 32

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 130, *New Century Version*

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 37:5, *Common English Bible*

way home. *These bones are the entire house of Israel*, Ezekiel is told in verse 11, and they will, one day, return to the land of Israel. Even now they are not cut off from God. God is present even in this place of exile.

In the New Testament story, Martha expressed her hope, her faith, that Lazarus would be raised again on the last day, a future resurrection. But Jesus said, *I am the resurrection and the life right now*. And then he restored Lazarus to life. He didn't prevent death. Instead, he transformed death into new life. He demonstrated that resurrected life is possible even in the present, it doesn't have to wait until sometime distant in the future.

In my personal story, two hours after crossing at least five possibilities off our list of places for Dad to stay, my niece suggested that we check if he could go back to Reflections, the place where he had been living. The next morning brought an unexpected answer. Reflections was prepared to take him back! Dad returned to familiar surroundings. What we had thought was impossible was a reality.

The cycle found in these stories – despair, lament, hope, restoration – is found throughout the biblical story and throughout the entire human story. Renewal and restoration; new life and transformation take many forms.

In another sermon I told the story of losing one of my favorite earrings. I searched the clothes I had been wearing, the recliner I had been sitting in, and all the floors in the house to no avail. It was gone. This loss was trivial in the larger scheme of things, but still was a cause for disappointment and lament. The next morning, I continued to fuss and moan as I took my dog for a walk. About two blocks from my house, I noticed something on the sidewalk. It was my missing earring. Unbelievable! Praise God! The lost is found!

I love to hear stories like these. They make great Sunday morning testimonies, where the lost is found, health is restored, relationships are renewed, people return home. The storyteller gives glory to God. The listeners smile and say, "Amen."

After hearing these stories, I often think, "Yes, but..." Yes, but what would your story be if the lost isn't found, health isn't restored, relationships aren't renewed, people can never return to their homes?

My dad's story was a "yes, but..." After his release from the hospital, he continued to remove the neck brace he needed for his injury to heal. During the next few months, he experienced more injuries. My brothers and I changed our ideas about what restoration looks like. We redefined what hope was in Dad's situation. I didn't have hope that my 89-year-old father's mind would be restored or that decisions about his care would suddenly get easier. My hope came from trust that God was present with Dad in his dementia.

Five months after his accident, Dad died. I experienced relief that his physical and mental struggles were over. I felt the same when my mother died four years later. Comfort came from knowing both my parents were present with God when their earthly lives ended. I'm grateful for the care both received. I continue to rejoice in their long lives, well-lived.

Grief is greater and hope more difficult to find when young people die. I think of Michael Sharp and Zaida Catalan who were kidnapped and killed in the Democratic Republic of Congo six years ago. They were part of a United Nations panel of experts who were investigating ongoing conflicts in the region.

Where are the restoration and hope in this story? Restoration comes in the legacy of a life cut short. Hope comes through the lives of children who, through the work of Michael and his companions, were no longer soldiers. Hope comes through the work of the people who were inspired and motivated by Michael's story. Hope and restoration are present even in the midst of immense grief.

The reality is that this cycle of despair, lament, hope, and restoration is continually playing out and folding back on itself. Each resurrected, restored, renewed, or transformed reality looks a bit different: a room in a memory care facility, a pair of earrings, a short life's work, a return from exile, a

loved one brought back to life. These cycles follow many timetables: 24 hours, 3 days, a week, 34 years, several generations, from the beginning of time until the end.

These texts from Ezekiel and John confront the denial of death that is part of North American culture. They plunge us into the great paradox of Lent: that we must face death to find life. They help us answer the burning questions. If Jesus could stop death, why doesn't he do it in my case? In the case of the person I love?

Death happens as part of the human experience. Jesus doesn't interrupt that process. But once it has happened, he transformed the significance of it. God didn't prevent the destruction and exile that caused the people of Israel to feel as if they were nothing but dry bones. But once it happened, God was present with them and offered new life to them.

These stories help us to think differently about the categories of life and death. Death is not as permanent as we think it is. Life is not as impermanent as we think it is. Death is a different state than life, but it's not completely the opposite. Resurrection doesn't only occur after death; it happens during life as well.

God's breath gives life to dusty bones. This breath moves forth in the Lazarus story. This same breath was breathed into Jesus during his life, death, and resurrection. This breath touches us when the Spirit comes upon us. This breath moves through the world, raising people into new life when all the odds are against it.

As we journey toward Easter, consider what dry bones and dry times are represented in your own lives. We continue to live in a time when doubts, hopelessness, depression, fear, and anxiety are prominent in our daily living. The lingering effects of the pandemic continue to impact our physical, economic, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. We experience the personal losses and struggles that are part of every human life.

Certainly, hopelessness and despair were the experience for the people of Israel at the time of Ezekiel's vision of dry bones and for the sisters and friends of Lazarus when he died. Sometimes when we read these stories we move too quickly to the "good" part, the part about the joy of a new, vibrant life. There is benefit in considering, and perhaps even valuing, the despair, while not wallowing in it. Consider what we can learn about ourselves and our relationship with the world and with God from the painful, difficult paths we sometimes walk.

In our discouragement and despair there is also value in looking for the hope present with us currently or in remembering the hope we've found in the past. What moments of joy, however fleeting they may be, have you experienced amid your present circumstances? What sign of hope can you see around and within you? What scripture, story, or promise can you cling to?

What we look forward to during Lent and celebrate at Easter is the victory of Jesus over death and the power of evil. We live in the hope and anticipation of a future time when all will be made right, when everything will be renewed and restored, when God's vision of shalom for all of creation will be realized. The biblical stories we read today celebrate God's redemptive action in the midst of lifelessness. These stories help us recognize that the resurrected life is also a present reality.

We encounter God in our mortality and our need for renewal. As we breathe, we witness and experience God's breath, which restores creation. The spirit of God dwells in us now. We live in the light and hope of this identity. And we wait with hopefulness for resurrection.

Thank you, God. Amen.