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Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Psalm 130, John 11:1-45

Finding Life in Dry Times

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.

Ezekiel and the Israelites had great cause for despair. The vision God gave to Ezekiel was given to offer 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, that God 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.”

When I preached on these same biblical texts three 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 wasn’t able to 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 keep him in bed until the nurses could come to assist him. The first night he tried to remove the protective coverings on his hands. After those were taken off, I tried to prevent him from removing his neck brace or getting out of bed.

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

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. Our first choice was full. Our second choice declined because they were not able to meet his needs. Third choice was full; fourth and fifth choices declined. The two other choices within a 25 mile radius that seemed acceptable to us were still considering.

My brothers and I 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?

We find despair and lament throughout the biblical story. 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.

Where is the hope in the stories we've read this morning? In the Old Testament scripture, God made a promise to Ezekiel saying, "These bones will live." God tells the prophet to speak to the bones, saying: "Thus says the Lord GOD: I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live." 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 so 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 way home. "These bones are the whole 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 in this place of exile – and they will return to their promised land.

In the New Testament story, Martha expresses her hope, her faith, that Lazarus will be raised again on the last day, a future resurrection. But Jesus says, "I am the resurrection and the life right now." And then he restores Lazarus to life. He demonstrates 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 made a suggestion. Why didn't 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 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? We all know that the fairy tale that ends happily ever after can’t stay that way forever.

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, I knew that Dad was present with God when his earthly life ended. I’m grateful for the care he received. I continue to rejoice in his long life, well-lived.

Grief was greater and hope more difficult to find in a story that dominated the Mennonite world during the time Dad was in the hospital. On March 12, 2017, Michael Sharp of the US, Zaida Catalan of Sweden, Betu Tshintela, an interpreter, driver Isaac Kabuayi and two unnamed motorbike drivers were kidnapped in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Sharp and Catalan were part of a United Nations panel of experts that was investigating ongoing conflicts in the region. The other four were Congolese men who were assisting them in their work.

The UN deployed a team of peacekeepers to search for those kidnapped. Family, friends, and strangers waited for news about Michael and the others as violence in the region escalated. Many prayers were offered on their behalf. Two weeks after the kidnapping, two Caucasian bodies were found in shallow graves in the search area. It soon was confirmed that these were the bodies of Michael and Zaida.

Is this restoration? Where is the 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, or renewed 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. And these cycles follow many timetables: 24 hours, 3 days, a week, 34 years, several generations, from the beginning of time until the end of time.

As we continue to journey toward Easter, we consider what dry bones and dry times are represented in our own lives. This isn’t difficult to do while we are living under a statewide stay at home order to try to slow the spread of COVID-19. This pandemic is making an enormous impact on physical, economic, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

I find some hope in the recommendation to change the phrase from “social distancing” to “physical distancing.” An order to stay at home doesn’t have to be about breaking contact with friends and family, but rather keeping physical distance to make sure the disease doesn’t spread. We must maintain physical distance between us to limit the spread of the virus. But we also must maintain social connections, a sense of community, and a sense of purpose. We need to keep seeking ways to be a community of faith even while we are separated physically.

We’re living in a time when doubts, hopelessness, depression, fear, and anxiety are prominent in our daily living. 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 value 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 in the midst of the present circumstances? What sign of hope can you see around and within you? What Bible verse, story, or promise can you cling to?

In today’s stories we find renewal, resuscitation, restoration, rest, rejuvenation, and resurrection. 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.

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 stories from Ezekiel and John celebrate God’s redemptive action in the midst of lifelessness. These stories help us recognize that the resurrected life is also a present reality.

Even during these days when breathing in can cause disease and breathing out can spread it, we also see the ability to breathe as a sign of restoration. When feeling stressed, take a deep breath. Slowing your breath calms you. You can relax your brain through your breath. The physical act of breathing can also be a spiritual exercise. You experience the breath of God.

I invite you to participate in a breathing and prayer exercise. Begin by slowly breathing in and out. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Three counts in and three counts out. In, 2, 3. Out, 2, 3. In, 2, 3. Out, 2, 3

Now add a prayer to your breathing. As you breathe in: Breath of God. As you breathe out: Breathe on me. Breath of God. Breathe on me. Breath of God. Breathe on me.

We encounter God in our mortality and our need for renewal. God replenished the “dry bones” of Israel. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. 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.