

Hope in God, Ezekiel 37: 1-14, John 11: 33-44

We see bones when something is wrong, when life is in real danger or life is over. Stories of broken bones, stories after battle when bodies and bones and severed limbs lie around, bones dug up in archaeological digs, x ray... so on.. bones are signs to us that something is wrong.

What a remarkable picture is painted in both of our readings this morning – a valley filled with dry bones, a cave/grave with a dead friend rising, surprising, amazing, all who were there to see or here to hear.

There is a turning point in the book of Ezekiel, made up of two parts. At Ezekiel 24:2, Ezekiel is informed by God that the king of Babylon has begun the siege against Jerusalem. At Ezekiel 33:21, the actual turning point, Ezekiel learns from a messenger that the city has fallen. Up to Ezekiel 24:2, Ezekiel's message is mainly "The city shall be destroyed." After Ezekiel 33:21, Ezekiel looks to the next prophetic peak, and prophecies, "The city shall be restored." It is at Ezekiel 24 that the prophet learns that when Jerusalem falls, his tongue will be loosed to speak a new message of hope; and people, sobered by the reality of Jerusalem's destruction, will begin to give him a hearing.

The Hebrew word for hope is 'tiqvah' which means "wait or to look for with confident, eager expectation, calling for patience, reminding us that the fulfillment of hope lies in the future". 'Tiqvah' is translated in the Septuagint by the Greek noun 'elpis' which means absolute assurance of future good, the way Scripture most often defines "hope" - not so, but hope sure! God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the despairing exiles that they are incorrect. Their hope has not perished. While this prophetic hope, this absolute assurance that God will do good to Israel in the future, will not necessarily be fulfilled in his hearer's lifetime, it will most assuredly be fulfilled!

Bones are the framework on which is "built" the human body. It follows that bones in this context speak of the framework, not of individual bodies coming to life but of the nation of Israel coming to life. Remember that at the time of this prophecy, the nation, the holy city of Jerusalem and the Holy Temple all lay in ruins. God is giving a prophecy of hope, remembering His great loving kindness or mercy in the midst of great wrath. God is acting in mercy by giving this hope filled promise. It is not a "hope so" type of hope, but a sure and steadfast promise that will come to fruition in the Lord's perfect plan and timing.

Ezekiel 37 deals with the restoration of the nation Israel to the land. This is pictured as a gradual process, for the prophet sees the process of bone being joined to bone, tied together with tendons, clothed with skin.

All of the hearers of these stories had been people with hope. They were a people who were building their lives on a promise; God had told their ancestors that they would inherit a land for themselves and their descendants would live in it forever.

Ezekiel is sent to them with the message we heard this morning. It is a message about the sometimes contradiction between what is going on around us - what we see, experience, feel - and what God is up to. Sometimes everything that we think, feel, or imagine tells us that God has moved.

For Israel, the possibility that God had moved was very real in the thinking of the day. Had God abandoned them? Was God absent - on leave?

These are familiar questions and concerns for every generation of people. The Bible is filled with stories of the struggles of countless generations to understand these questions and to share their experiences of the answers.

In the Gospel's story, Jesus is summoned to the bedside of his sick friend Lazarus. He arrives too late. Lazarus has died. In fact, he has been buried for three days by the time Jesus gets there. Did Jesus make a mistake? Was this simply some cruel joke by God to make a point about Jesus and Jesus' power?

Jesus grieves when he learns of the death of his friend, Lazarus. Those of you who are presently grieving the death of a loved one know exactly what this means. Life, for all of its occasional beauty, loses its sparkle because it all ends in death. Before all of our achievements and attainments, death speaks a devastating word.

Jesus goes to the cemetery and, in a loud voice, cries out, "Lazarus, come out!" And once dead Lazarus comes forth, bound up in his grave clothes. And Jesus commands, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Although death seems to be in command of our lives, forcing us to deny its reality, Jesus is in command of death. When he gets to the cemetery, he takes charge, gives the orders, defeats death.

I know that it's not yet Easter, God's supreme defeat of death, yet even before Easter, Jesus is Lord of Life.

"A humanist philosopher came to the college to speak. He spoke of the nobility, the fullness of life without the consolations of religion. He noted all of the famous, good people who had been produced by non-theistic, purely humanistic philosophy. Then some student asked something about death and the philosopher (honestly) replied, "Well, yes, death is definitely a problem for humanism. In the face of death, there really is not much to be said by an exclusively human based philosophy of life. Death tends to be the main defeat of secular points of view."

Yes, it does. Death is the great, all-powerful defeat of all attempts to speak positively about life without God.

Lazarus in the tomb is bound. And we are also bound. Death determines what we do, fills us with fear. We build, we achieve, accumulate, and acquire. But everything fades and dies. That sombre fact accounts for much of what we do in life. We cannot deny death.

Perhaps grief, anxiety, financial troubles, hatred, resentment, or a lack of faith has put us in our own tomb of despair.

Into this sombre reality, a breeze blows, there is a breath, a life-giving breath. Old, dead and dry bones take on flesh, move, live. Jesus comes out to the cemetery and, in a loud, conquering voice, shouts, "Lazarus, come out!" This mummy-like form emerges from the tomb. Out of the grave, free from death but still captive to it.

Jesus is indeed "the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:24). Resurrection does not mean the restoration of life to a corpse, it entails rather a transformation of life. Moreover, the eternal life that Jesus gives his followers does not abolish death but rather transcends it. Faith in the risen Jesus is not fully developed until it enables a believer to face physical death with the firm confidence that the present possession of eternal life is not simply a pledge of resurrection on the last day but is rather a present and continuing participation in the life of the ever-living Jesus now, at this moment.

Those who believe in Jesus never truly died.