Choose This Day . . . Despair or Hope
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-27

Some years ago I read the story of a wealthy Texas rancher who decided to throw a party for his friends - not just an ordinary party, but a party everyone would remember, a party unlike any other the guests had previously attended. The rancher’s plan was to fill his Olympic-sized pool with sharks. As guests gathered around the pool, the rancher announced that if any young man would jump in and swim across the pool, the rancher would gift him with one of three things: “You may have my ranch, or you may have a million dollars, or you may marry my daughter.” Instantly there was a clamor at the other end of the pool that caught everyone’s attention. A young man was in the pool, frantically swimming, fighting off the sharks in the bubbling, churning water. Miraculously he made it to the other side safely. The rancher was dumbfounded, he didn’t expect anyone to respond to the challenge. But true to his word, the rancher asked, “Which of the three options will you choose?” The young man immediately responded that he didn’t want any of the three things. “All right, you name it. I’ll get it for you,” countered the rancher. The young man answered, “I want the guy who shoved me into the pool!”

Each of us - do we not - periodically finds ourselves in circumstances seemingly beyond our control, times when it feels as if we are swimming among the sharks, threatened with drowning in the stresses and struggles of daily living. It may be a time of personal crisis, a time of deep uncertainty when we cannot see our way clear in the midst of confusion. It may be a time of despair as we ponder the conditions of the world - the continuing reliance upon violence and warfare as the solution to humanity’s differences, mass shootings fueled by fear and hatred and by social and economic injustice, the current mammoth viral pandemic, and in the face of it all we feel so overwhelmed that we wonder if we can make any difference at all. At times like these we have little sense that life can change, that conditions will get any better. We find it difficult to see our way out of the fog.
However, both of today’s Scripture lessons would suggest an alternative perspective, as we are confronted with a counter message of hope. Even though the events that stand behind each story appear desperate and bleak, the stories urge us towards another way of viewing reality; they proclaim the biblical promise of hope and of new life. Look first at our text from Ezekiel, chapter thirty-seven. The ancient Israelites are in exile in Babylon, forced from their beloved homeland. Cut off, isolated, separated from all they had known and cherished, their much-loved Temple and their holy city of Jerusalem now in ruins, it is as if their very bones have dried up and all hope has vanished. It is a desolate time, a time of utter despair and hopelessness.

Yet it is in the very midst of such trying circumstances that Ezekiel has a vision from God - he may well be standing on the actual battlefield, viewing firsthand the aftermath of war’s horror and destruction and waste. Or, perhaps more likely, it is now sometime later, during the days in Babylon, yet Ezekiel cannot shake from his mind’s eye that picture of utter devastation. It is as if all he can see is a valley of dry bones. And in one of Ezekiel’s times of remembering that wretched image, the prophet hears God questioning, “Mortal, can these bones live?” In other words, “Is there any hope that new life can emerge out of this desperate situation?”

Imagine Ezekiel’s shock when he hears the voice of God ordering him to prophesy to those lifeless bones before him, proclaiming, “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.” As the vision continues, a rattling noise follows, and Ezekiel watches as the bones come together and are covered by flesh. And finally the breath of life is breathed into the bones, into the very people who have been lamenting, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone; we are cut off.”
Ezekiel then hears the voice of God instructing him to say to the exiles, “I am going to open your graves...I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you, my people, shall know that I am the Lord . . . I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live.” (vv. 11-14).

I will put my spirit in you, and you will live. An incredible promise, that the ancient Israelites - and you and I - can be born anew to a living hope. We can opt for life rather than death, courage above caution and fear, relationships rather than separation, light rather than darkness, hope in place of despair. We find ourselves moving from anxiety to peace, from anguish to fulfillment, from hatred to love, from sadness to joy. And we do so, not on our own strength alone, but as we open ourselves to the renewing, empowering, encouraging, strengthening, redeeming breath of God. We live in the present and move into the future, trusting that the Spirit of God is at work in us and among us, that even now, God is doing something markedly new.

Isn’t that also the message at the heart of the remarkable story found in the Gospel of John, chapter eleven - the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead? Living, as we are today, in a world accustomed to rational explanations, many are prone to dismiss this story as just too incredible. And yet, doesn’t the story compel us to consider the nature of God? Is our Creator God now essentially uninvolved in human life, or is our God who even now is in the process of creating something new? If so, might not the raising of Lazarus be an event that underscores this mystery of God? Doesn’t the story of Lazarus, much like Ezekiel’s vision, remind us that there is far more to life than what we now see, that as we begin to see with God’s vision, we recognize that pain and sin and death do not have the final word? Doesn’t the raising of Lazarus remind us that we can begin to live now in the promise that, whether in life or in death, we stand in God’s loving and gracious presence?
Still, it’s a story that stretches our imagination. Jesus is preaching and teaching across the Jordan River when he receives word about Lazarus being ill. Apparently Jesus visited in the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, with some frequency, where it appears he found an oasis of quiet and calm. Because of the closeness of their relationship, the sisters send a message concerning their brother’s illness to Jesus. But considering their relationship, Jesus’ response seems curious, as he remains where he is for several days. No doubt the disciples are relieved, for they had been holding their breath, for fear of Jesus returning to the very place where resistance to his message was growing by leaps and bounds. “But Rabbi,” they said, “a short while ago the Jews there tried to stone you, and yet you are going back?” (11:8). Indeed, two days later, when Jesus announces their return to Judea, the twelve object. Seeing that Jesus will not be deterred, Thomas speaks for the rest, saying boldly, “Let us also go, that we may die with him.” (11:16).

The scene then shifts to Bethany, with Jesus arriving four days after Lazarus has died, a fact that underscores the finality of death. Jewish tradition of that day suggested that the soul hovered around the body in the grave for three days after death, hoping to reenter the body. But after the third day of death, the soul leaves the body for good.

Hearing of Jesus’ coming, Martha goes to meet him. With an element of criticism in her voice, Martha says to Jesus, “If you had been here, my brother would not have died.” Though deeply disappointed, Martha’s confidence in Jesus remains high, and she continues, “But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask”. (vv. 21-22). Martha’s confidence sets the stage for Jesus’ life-affirming words, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.” (vv. 25-26).
Though Martha does not yet fully grasp what Jesus is asserting, John hopes that we, his readers, do. Jesus is not just talking about the afterlife; more so, he is proclaiming that a new quality of life can begin here and now. In relationship with Jesus, we can live a life no longer bound by fear of death, for not even the reality of death can separate us from the wondrous gift of God’s loving presence. Freed from fear, we discover the power of eternal life; we experience the quality of a new way of living.

And so, when Jesus calls Lazarus out of the tomb, he commands the stunned observers to “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.” (v. 44). We too need to be unbound - unbound from our fears, unbound from that which keeps us from becoming all that God has in store for us, unbound so that we might begin to see as God sees, to love as God loves. Unbound, that we might experience, in the depth of our beings, the incredible gift of forgiveness and grace. Unbound, that we might move beyond complacency and dullness of routine, and encounter abundant life.

The two stories - Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones coming to life, and Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead - confront us with the good news that God has the power to transform life, even in the bleakest of circumstances. But transformation demands a response. Transformation demands that we let go of our fears, our desperate need to be in control, to be at the center of the universe. Transformation means allowing God to occupy center stage in our lives, a step many are not willing to take. And so the gospel, the good news, is frequently hard to bear. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day saw it as such a threat that, in the aftermath of Lazarus being raised to new life, the leaders began plotting how they might put Jesus to death. What irony, that the gift of life would lead to plans for death, rather than an embracing of the way of hope!
Emil Brunner, a Swiss Reformed theologian, once observed that “a church which has no clear and definite message to give on this point [of hope] has nothing to say at all.” Jesus came, not to create a new rulebook, not simply to offer us a list of dos and don’ts that we tick off one by one. Rather, Jesus came that we might have life, that we might have hope, that our faith might be in us as an acute fever. Jesus came, that we might find a new attitude of heart, a lightness of spirit that enables us to face whatever the world throws our way. And through it all, we carry the blessings of hope, knowing deep in our hearts that nothing in life or even in death, nothing in all creation, can separate us from the gift of God’s love in Jesus Christ our Lord. Choose this day the way of hope. Amen.

Prayer

Gracious Spirit, Breath of God, come among us, filling us with life anew, filling us with renewed hope and purpose for our living, filling us with grace and compassion, that we come to love as you love, to serve others as you serve us, to make peace as your presence fills us with peace.

We come before you, opening our hearts and minds, our very spirits, to all that you have in store for us. We seek to place ourselves afresh in your loving embrace - to know, deep within our souls, that nothing in all creation can separate us from your gracious care.

Breathe on us, Breath of God, till we are wholly yours. Form us into a community of compassion; guide our feet in paths of discipleship, paths of peacemaking, paths of faithful living.

God of grace and forgiveness, take us as we are and fill us with new vision - with your vision - that we might become instruments of your goodness and grace. Where there is discord, let us sow peace. Where there is hatred, love. Where there is sadness, joy. Where there is fear, courage. Where there is despair, hope.
Holy Breath of God, breathe your life into us and into our world. Grant peace to troubled hearts and to divided peoples. Guide us as we seek to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, reach out to the forgotten, and walk in the compassionate spirit of Jesus, through whom we offer these prayers. Amen.

March 29, 2020

Clay Z. Moyer