

“The Promise of Reconnection”  
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Hickory Neck Episcopal Church – Toano, Virginia  
V Lent – 6 April 2014  
Ezekiel 37:1-14

In 587 B.C., a Babylonian army marched westward, conquered a small kingdom without much trouble, ransacked the great Temple of Jerusalem for treasure, then destroyed it, and finally took most of the people back East with them to serve as their slaves. For the Israelites, it was the end of the world as they knew it. As a people whose entire identity was rooted in the liberating story of the Exodus from Egypt, they must have wondered how this could have possibly happened. They must have wondered why God would abandon them to this terrible fate.

There were plenty of prophets, like Ezekiel, who warned people what was going to happen, but nobody listened to them much, until those awful prophetic predictions became a harsh reality. Then people paid attention to what they once ignored and gave honor to a wisdom they once ridiculed. They remembered the prophecies and took them to heart. The oracles of God helped make sense of the chaos and tragedy their lives had become.

As the Israelites reconsidered the prophetic words of people like Ezekiel, they realized that their plight was not despite God’s best efforts. Instead, their conquest and exile occurred because of God’s best efforts. It was a punishment, a sort of awful cosmic object lesson, intended to wake them up and bring them to repentance and a renewed rightness of life.

We might be tempted to regard this as a situation where people merely suffered the natural consequences of their foolish choices, and sometimes, that is the case. But the prophets make clear God’s intentional and direct agency in the historical event of the conquest and exile. This may make God look wrathful and vengeful, but the fact of the matter is that we cannot fathom the depths of God’s mercy or the nature of God’s love. God wants what’s best for us,

and God knows what's best for us better than we do. Getting us to understand this, though, can take radical measures.

Israel had lost its integrity as a nation. No longer faithful to the God who had given them so much, they worshipped the false idols of their neighbors, hedging their bets, if you will, and in the process forsaking their covenant connection with God. Idolatry was a major complaint of the prophets, and none spoke against it more forcefully than Ezekiel, the only biblical prophet who was also a priest.

The collapse of the covenant brought about by idolatry led people into all the wrong ways. Economic injustice was a huge problem. Inequality was rife. People weren't playing fair. The rich and the powerful used their advantages to gain control over people. The kingly court and the courts of justice were both corrupt. Great violence erupted. Even something as basic as honoring the Sabbath went by the wayside, driven to the margins by the greed of those obsessed with profit margins.

The result was defeat and enslavement, vividly symbolized by the valley of dry bones. Then as now, the proper burial of the dead was very important. The idea of simply leaving bodies to rot out in the open, until nothing but desiccated bones remained, was just as horrible a thought to the Israelites as it is to us. The valley of dry bones symbolizes destruction, but also disgrace and exposure. The valley brings to mind a battlefield where the dishonor was so great that no one bothered to dispose of the dead with dignity, or perhaps we can envision them as the remnant of the victims of a plague so lethal that none would dare touch the diseased bodies to lay them at rest.

Yet God brought Ezekiel to witness this spectacle in the valley to offer a promise, to give hope that the disconnection between God and his chosen people would not be permanent, but

that God would reconnect what had fallen apart and once again breathe life into a nation that had overwhelmingly chosen sin and death. The scattered bones lying on the valley floor, representing Israel, would be reassembled, the creative force of the people restored and the covenant renewed. This good news, though delivered in gruesome fashion, made clear that God is faithful, even when we are not, and though we often suffer the consequences of our faithless choices, God will redeem us, despite our undeserving.

We would do well to heed the prophecy of Ezekiel and others like him, because the prophecies that held true for the Israelites remain relevant to us today: as individuals, as a community of faith, and as a nation. Our landscape is littered with dry bones. The sense of disconnection from God and one another is so great. Rare is the person today who offers sacrifices of grain and blood to stone statues, but idolatry runs rampant, as we make various things a higher priority than the sacred covenant we share with God. We do this by devoting our time, energy, and resources to pursuits that may be worthy, but which cannot compare to a faithful relationship with God, which too often we leave neglected for mere entertaining distractions.

We live in a world where economic inequality is extreme, where people cheat and break laws both sacred and secular to get ahead, and when caught they sorrow only in that they were not sufficiently clever to avoid detection. Our government is corrupt, beholden to a caste of elites who prize power so much that they not only forget to fear God, but act as if they are gods. The prevailing attitude is that might makes right. So violence abounds. Is it any wonder that we live in a fearful age, in an anxious age full of enmity and strife; an age of such great disconnection that more and more people refuse to believe that God even exists?

Yet just as the prophecy still holds true, so also does the promise. God wants to put us back to together again. God wants to provide us continuity in an ever-changing world. God wants to breathe life into people surrounded by a world that glorifies death and destruction. How we respond to God's initiative is crucial.

Will we put God first, not just when it's convenient but all of the time, or will we keep our priorities pretty much the same? Will we speak out and act against injustice, or stay content to stay on the sidelines with meek complacency? Will we listen to the prophetic word or wait until disaster strikes to pay attention? These questions are easy to answer, but the answers are hard to put into practice.

However, there is no excuse, because even though we lack the wisdom and power to act rightly, God in his infinite mercy and goodness gives us grace if only we receive it. God gives us grace, even before we ask for it. So the crucial question is, are we ready for God to turn our lives around? Are we ready for God to reconnect us, to breathe new life into us, or is the valley floor really a rather comfortable place for our bones to lie, bleached and dry, severed and disconnected forever? Amen.