

SERMON

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There is Always Hope

April 2nd, 2017

John 11:1-45. Ezekial 37: 1-14

Have you ever had a sleepless night? Perhaps if you're female, and you're 50 something, then like me, you frequently find yourself waking up at about 3am. There is no apparent reason – maybe you're little over heated, or perhaps it's just hormones doing their thing. Like me, you might toss and turn for a while, maybe you get up for a glass of water or something, and then you find yourself just lying there. Nothing works. You just can't get back to sleep. And if that situation sounds familiar to you, then you know that sleepless nights can seem endless. You begin to wonder if the dawn will ever come, and time seems to stretch on and on, and perhaps you begin to give up hope of having a good night's sleep.

In our comfortable homes, with food and clothing, and all our daily needs, perhaps not having a good night sleep is the closest that **we** can come to understanding despair. But for many, loss of hope and despair is a daily reality.

Both our scripture readings today are set in places of despair, places where there is little hope. In the Hebrew testament, the prophet Ezekiel was a captive along with the rest of the nation of Israel. The nation had fallen away from God in sin and rebellion, and God had withdrawn the promise of protection and blessings. The result was that Israel had been conquered by their enemies.; they were captives, and their cities lay in rubble. (It all sounds very familiar to refugee homeland cities that we know, doesn't it!) It seemed as if the nation of Israel had died spiritually when they gave up hope in God, and they had died physically when they were taken to serve in foreign lands.

But it is in one such foreign land, that Ezekiel was given a vision from the Lord. In his vision, Ezekiel sees a valley of dry bones. A valley of death and despair. He walks around the bones. They are scattered all around. I imagine that the sun is beating down, the bones are dry and brittle from the heat of the sun. There is no hope that there could possibly be any life in them. But God speaks to Ezekiel and says:

"Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel answers: *"God, you alone know"* (Ezekiel 37:3)

You see, Ezekiel does not give up hope. He knows that the breath and Spirit of God can even bring dead bones back to life. He has hope. But even with such hope, I suspect that Ezekiel was a little amazed and shocked in his vision, when he heard a rattling sound, and saw the bones moving. He tells us in verse 7 & 8:

" there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone . I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them."

And as if that is not enough, Ezekiel then gazes in amazement as finally life was breathed into the bodies.

You see in Ezekiel's vision, God was picturing for the prophet, in a very visual and graphic way, that God can also do the same thing for a dead nation. Israel was a nation that claimed that:

Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off. (Ezekiel 37:11)

God was showing Ezekiel, that there could be hope for a resurrection for the nation of Israel. And of course, we know the rest of the story, and how hope came through the birth of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

But as we journey in Lent towards the cross, we are just two weeks away from Jesus' death. We are just two weeks away from having all that hope pulled out from under us, all hope crucified on the cross. We are so near to Jerusalem. In fact, our gospel reading says that Lazarus' tomb is "two miles away," from the scene of Jesus' death.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is like Ezekiel's vision of dry bones. It is a story where we see the human experience of loss and despair:

First, we hear that Lazarus is sick and needs help. Now we are not told how long he's been sick for, but we know that Mary and Martha feel that calling Jesus will be the last resort; it is their last hope. And so, we know that Lazarus isn't just sick – he's dying.

Then we hear the despair from the disciples that Jesus is going to go back to a place that they want to kill him; they are afraid; they know the dangers, and they have little hope that Jesus will escape with his life if they go back to Judea.

Then we have the questioning and disbelief of 'what difference will it make'. If go back there now, what difference will it make? It's a common response when we are beginning to lose hope. "What difference will it make if I pray?" Isn't that how we feel when we are in situations of despair?

And next in the story we witness the grief and the mourning of the loved ones, and the community encircling them. It feels final. It feels like there is nothing we can do now. Lazarus is dead. All hope is gone.

But then, we witness Mary and Martha's hope and their profession of faith. Even in the face of death, they wistfully voice "what might have been". In the midst of their grieving and their tears, they do not give up hope.

So, what part of this story do you identify with? Perhaps like Mary and Martha, the disciples, and the onlookers, you don't fully understand everything, and perhaps you find yourselves expressing your incomprehension when faced with situations of extreme despair. Why? Why me, you might ask.

Maybe you recognize the courage, or the anger, or the weeping.

Or perhaps you have faithfully and unwaveringly been like Mary and Martha, who placed their trust in Christ even in the face of the physical reality of their brother's death.

Or maybe, we are more like the mixed motives and responses of the crowd – trying to figure out what's going on, drawing conclusions, not wanting to miss anything...and then when it is all over, going back to everyday "life," either transformed and believing, --or departing in critical, suspicious, and cynical disbelief.

Which one do you identify with? These are all familiar, powerful echoes of moments in the story that we share. But the most powerful is Jesus' own gratitude to God when he enters the tomb and says:

Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me (John 11:41-42)

In that verse, we hear the hope that comes with the knowledge that God always hears us. Is that what you identify with?

It's interesting that at the end of the story, we do not hear a single word from Lazarus. We don't know of his response to this extraordinary experience. But we're not surprised by the response of the "ordinary" people, who witnessed the "extraordinary" that day. Again, we see a range of reactions, from faith and following, to fear and fretting. And if we read just beyond today's passage, we find the report of those who went to the religious authorities; those who speculated on the dangers of having such a powerful man "loose" in their midst; those that were worried about how people turned to Jesus for hope.

Is that us today? Do we worry, or do we turn to Jesus? What do we do in our grief, our loss, our anxiety? Do we give in to our feelings of hopelessness? Do we experience a lack of faith? How do we pray when faced with financial troubles, hatred, or resentment? We are blessed here in our comfortable homes, with food on the table, but still at times we might find ourselves in our own tombs of despair. In our own valley of dry bones. And when we are in dark times, do we call to God for hope?

A long time ago, in a far-off land, Jesus stood outside that tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come out!" This story is an old story, but God is still speaking to us today, calling us out from our tombs of despair. In both scriptures today, life came with the breath of the Spirit. When we feel that we are in places of despair, when we feel that our bones are dried up, when we are in darkness, and when we feel spiritually dead – we can call to God for the breath of Spirit. For in the midst of hopelessness, new life can be created with the word and the Spirit. When we as individuals, and as a congregation experience the breath of the Spirit, we can be alive again?

Will you allow the breath of the Spirit to transform us today?

Amen.