

## 12-07-2025 Worship Service

### **Morning Prayer –**

Loving God, as we get further into the season of Advent, we realize that we might not be waiting as much as we're rushing. We realize that we might not be trusting as much as we're really trying to control. And we remember that it's more difficult to let your light shine through us when we're too tired and preoccupied to nurture your light within in us.

Help us, God. Give us a willingness to wait on you, to trust you and to be attentive to the work your Spirit is trying to do within each of us.

We're grateful for the gifts of the season, for the beautiful skies we've been able to witness, the stunning sunsets, the huge super-moon, the colder temperatures and the shorter days, reminding us that it's in this season that we are especially reminded of the coming birth of Jesus being the Light in these darker days, the Hope that we cling to when things seem dismal, the Peace that the world longs for.

On this Pearl Harbor remembrance day, we think again of the lives that were lost, the irreparable damage that was done on that day and then, even more-so in the years that the second World War was fought. O Lord, lead us in your ways of peace. Convict us to share your gospel of peace with justice, that we might be courageous enough to give witness to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, the one who taught us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute others for their faith.

Gracious God, give us ears to hear, hearts to understand, willing spirits to live out the meaning of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name...

### **Offering Prayer –**

Giver of all good gifts, provider of all that we have, open our hearts that we may be joyful and generous givers of what you have given us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Message -- Advent 2 – Ezekiel 37 Peace in the valley of the dry bones Pastor Lois Harder**

For two weeks in a row, it seems we have a story from the Hebrew Bible (or, the Old Testament) whose ancient wisdom hits pretty squarely with some of our contemporary life and experience. Last Sunday we read in the apocalyptic book of Daniel about the steadfast faith of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – the three Hebrew immigrants who refused to be cowed by the tyrant King Nebuchadnezzar as he demanded their allegiance and worship. They declined, even under threat of death, and resolutely proclaimed their sole allegiance to Yahweh God, creator of heaven and earth. Through the power of God they came out of the fiery furnace unscathed and faithful. Today the suggested text is from the prophet Ezekiel, chapter 37.

Along with the well-known song “Dem Bones” by the Black writer and civil rights activist, James Weldon Johnson, Ezekiel 37 is famous because of its ghoulish imagery and the prophet's insistence on giving his audience a lot of gory details.

The fact is, Ezekiel and his listeners were living a lot of gory details. One commentator wrote that “Ezekiel’s audience (was) liv(ing) life with an open wound... Chapter 37 is a text crafted to address the loss, pain, and trauma associated with the exile.” The story overflows with symbolism and ultimately, hope, but you don’t get to the hope until you’ve taken a long walk through the valley of death. Ezekiel was writing around the year 572 BCE.

I daresay there are a lot of people in the year 2025 AD who are all-too-well acquainted with loss, pain and trauma. And for many, that pain *is* associated with having been exiled from home – ironically, some in the same geographic area that Ezekiel was writing about. But we’re seeing people all over the world in exile – either by force or by choice. People only choose exile when the fear of staying runs deeper than the roots that are holding a person in a place. There can be a symbolic sense of exile that we feel when our own country – or the world – is in a state of political upheaval, unsteadiness or divisiveness. I think many of us are feeling that now, as if what’s familiar or predictable or dependable or survivable, is shifting irretrievably. That sense of loss, pain and trauma can come from all sorts of places. We can experience a kind of exile with a medical diagnosis, the loss of a job, a rupture in a relationship, the death of a loved one, a life-changing mistake that we can’t take back or fix.

“Exile” can be experienced by millions of people all at the same time, or in the solitude of an individual. But whatever the circumstance, the presence of God is the same. It shows up as God’s Ruach (the Hebrew word) – God’s breath, spirit, life. In this story in Ezekiel 37 it’s the whole house of Israel – the entire people of God had been exiled from their land, and also, they felt, exiled from God. As a people they were in deep despair; they said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. We are cut off completely.”

Their hope wasn’t gone only because people had died, as awful as that was. In his vision, the bones that Ezekiel was walking around in – and there were a lot of them, and they were dry, very dry... a lot of dead bodies that had been there a long time – those were the bones of people who hadn’t just died. They’d been slaughtered. Their lives had met violent ends. And they hadn’t just lost their lives. They’d lost their homeland, their prosperity, their dreams and aspirations, their identity. They were in a thick fog of loss that hung in the air long after the war was over. And then in Ezekiel’s vision, after he’d wandered around awhile in the midst of all those very dry bones God asked him whether those bones could live. Wisely, Ezekiel didn’t answer the question, but instead turned it back to God, “O Lord God, YOU know!” As if to say, “I don’t know, but YOU know!” Ezekiel seemed to acknowledge the hard truth of the situation, but also wanted to leave the door open for the possibilities of what God could do.

God, who could’ve resolved the question, seemed to welcome human partnership and told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones. Within the prophesy there was a double mention of this all-important Hebrew word Ruach – God’s breath, spirit, life. Ruach can only come from God and is reminiscent of the creation account in which God formed the humans and then into them blew the breath of life.

“Ezekiel does what he’s told,” commentator Brent Strawn writes, “but... the work isn’t done after this first sermon to the bones. They rattle and jump around. They come together, bone on bone and then they have sinews and then flesh. But they’re like zombies; a great host of bodies

with no breath – and therefore no life. So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy a second time, (but) this time prophesy to the breath itself; (to tell it to) come from the four winds and bring life to these dead bodies. The second sermon does the trick; the breath comes and the bodies come to life and stand up as an exceedingly large and impressive force.

But then comes a third sermon. This one is God's to the prophet and then to the exiles through the prophet..." Strawn goes on, "God knows that (the exiles) are saying that their hope is gone and that they are completely cut off...God doesn't rebut the exiles in the least; instead the Lord affirms, repeatedly, that the exiles are indeed in 'graves' – graves that God will open up in order to raise them up...in this third sermon God claims these humble and humiliated exiles, calling them 'my people' and promising, a second time, '... you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.'" Long before this, the people had to stop trusting in their own hubris, their own sense of self-determination, thinking that they alone could achieve what they wanted through military might, or by putting themselves in positions of power. They had to confess that they had forgotten the covenant – again. Their job was to be a light to the nations, to give witness to the love and power of Yahweh, to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God.

Here in Ezekiel 37, is what another writer calls "a ridiculous hope". When all hope has been lost and the despair is deep, the valley is full of very dry bones that have been picked clean, the Creator is faithful and comes with ruach – the breath, the spirit, and life begins again.

This is a hope that we can hardly conceive of – that only the Creator can offer. And that's the mystery. Our Creator God doesn't forget, but remains steadfast to the covenant that was made with all of creation. When we've forgotten and are in the depths of our human exile, we can humbly return to God and realize that God has been present all along with ruach to resurrect, to breathe, to bring new life where there are only old, dry bones. This is why we wait each year, in the season of Advent, to remind ourselves that we have this "ridiculous hope"! The hope of the new life that God sent as a human child – Immanuel, God with us. Thanks be to God!

Resources:

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/ezekiel-valley-of-dry-bones/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-12>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/ezekiel-valley-of-dry-bones/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-3>

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/valley-of-bones/commentary-on-ezekiel-371-14-4>

*Believers Church Bible Commentary, Ezekiel* by Millard Lind, Herald Press, 1996.

**Benediction –**

Be filled with the ridiculous hope that only God can offer. Be ready for the Spirit to do something new, something unexpected, to breathe new life into old, lifeless bones, renewing and restoring thoughts and attitudes in ways that only God can. Amen.