

Covenant Mennonite Church
April 10, 2011
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Title: The life-giving Word
Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-44

Pearl and I discussed this morning's service earlier this week, and she wondered if I wanted both Scripture texts read in their entirety, and I admitted that this meant a rather lengthy amount of reading which might seem *too* lengthy. But she wisely advised that if we wanted to get the full story we needed to read the texts. I guess no one goes to half a movie, or shows up for only scene two and three of a four act play. But somehow we've become accustomed to tidbit scripture reading, just a verse here or there to make a point. So its good to be carried along in a full length biblical story, or two.

The texts for today are substantial in length but more so in dramatic content. Ezekiel 37 and John 11 seemed to be permanently paired together in the lectionary, so every three years they come up during the Lenten season. And sure enough, I checked back and found that I preached from these two texts in April 08.

I want us this morning, to look at these two astonishing dramas, side by side, and see perhaps with fresh impact, the **power of God's word to create and recreate life**; to see the potential and **power of the word God's speaks to create** hope where no one might have any hope at all. In this world in which hopelessness and death seem at times to be such insurmountable realities, God is a life-giving, life-renewing God. That I believe is the gospel proclamation, the good news, which just spills out of these biblical texts.

I'd like to invite you to join me in looking at these two stories, an Old Testament prophetic text, and an episode from the life of Jesus Christ, in side by side fashion. One, then the other, through the different stages of the dramas:

First, the scene:

Ez: Ezekiel, we are told, is taken by the Spirit of the Lord out into a valley which is filled with bones. Bones in every direction, bones that are *very dry*, it says, as if to emphasize that these are very hopeless old bones. This is probably an old battlefield, a place that has seen terrible chaos and death. And now it's just filled with nameless bones of long forgotten ones. The bones have probably been dragged around by scavengers and are scattered all over the place. A very dismal and hopeless sight.

John: In the Gospel text, the scene is also of death, but very different. A brother, loved and named Lazarus, has recently died. Grief is still raw, "why" questions and "if only" questions rage. The grimness of physical decay is just setting in. Also a dreary and desolate scene, but this time very current, still filled with mourners.

Secondly, in these scenes of death, God asks a question:

Ez: To Ezekiel God asks, "***Son of Man, can these bones live?***" That's a very big question. A question that plumbs the depths of faith, even for a prophet of God. Can these very old, dry scattered bones, live?

And Ezekiel gives a very safe answer: "***O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.***" Now that may seem evasive, but notice that it already expresses faith. Most people would be expected to say "NO". Old dried up bones scattered around a field can definitely not live again. That never happens. But Ezekiel doesn't say NO. He doesn't rule out possibilities when it comes

to questions from God. He gives an appropriate answer: “God, only you know if these bones can live again”

John: In the Gospel text, the Lord also asks a question. It is to Martha, just as Jesus is arriving at the scene of grief. Jesus says to Martha:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

It’s different than the question to Ezekiel, a bit puzzling in whether it’s talking about the present or future, but it gets at the same matter of faith: *do you believe that life can come forth even when you see the grim reality of death?* And that this will come about through Jesus, who is resurrection and life himself? Again, a big question of faith. Martha shows no hesitancy: ***“Yes Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who has come into the world.”*** In other words, *What you say Jesus, I believe, because I believe in who you are.* Martha shows no doubt. In fact, you may have noticed that she had made very big expressions of faith even before Jesus asked. In v. 21 she had already said, ***“Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died. But I know that even now God will give you whatever you ask.”*** Sounds like she was ready for...for anything, with Jesus around.

So, we have the scenes, both places of death – one ancient, dry and dusty, the other current and raw with emotion - and we have questions from God/Jesus, plumbing the depths of faith in the power of God to create and recreate life.

Now before we proceed to “what happens” in response to these question, I want us to pause slightly and notice something else very important, an underlying reality in these stories, something very formative in our understanding of God. And it is simply this: God cares...**God cares!**

It is God who takes all the initiative in the valley of dry bones. God’s spirit transports Ezekiel into this scene. And God says that this valley of death actually symbolizes the people of Israel, who were just then hopelessly groaning as Prisoners of War in Babylon. That is what this vision is about. God sees the people he loves, and he sees that they are defeated and demoralized. They’re finished. Like all these dry bones. But God sees and cares, and is laying plans for an amazing new start. God says, ***“I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel.”*** Good news is coming for these crushed and defeated people!!

At the tomb of Lazarus, we also see, even more dramatically, that God cares about human experience. We see it in what is known as the shortest verse in the Bible. As Jesus approaches the tomb of his friend, and as he becomes fully aware of the crying and grief all around him, we read two words which reveal endless volumes about our Lord and God.

Jesus wept.

You know, there were many gods in the ancient world, among the nations. And how often weren’t these gods pictured as distant deities, a way off above the earth, far removed from the trials and struggles of people. Or if these gods did come near, how often weren’t they feared as capricious or hostile spirits, to be placated and appeased. So the very notion that there is a God, a compassionate God, who comes near, in fact, who becomes a suffering person, is the unique treasure of biblical faith. And in this story, as Jesus stands in a place of death, surrounded by grieving humans, we see the depth of God’s compassion. Jesus too,

cried. Jesus grieved. We might ask, Why? Why did he cry? He knew what he was about to do. He knew that in minutes, this scene would be transformed by incredulous joy. He knew what was coming. So why did he weep?

Perhaps here we see the tears of God falling over a hurting and grieving world. Perhaps in this moment we see the timeless Lord and God of the universe shedding tears, as he joins in the grief which so often flows in this world. Time, for a moment, stands still, and Jesus weeps. And we see a picture of the God we trust; in whom we place our hope. A God who walks here and truly cares.

Now let's proceed to "what happens"

The next detail in the stories is that God requires a bold step of faith from someone. God acts, but God calls for human participation:

Ez: In the valley of bones, God says to Ezekiel, ***"Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."***

Imagine standing alone, in a field of bones, and yelling out loud, "bones, listen up." That's pretty weird actually. I think a few of us might feel a bit stupid talking out loud to bones. But Ezekiel, to his credit, faithfully prophesied. That is, he spoke the words of the Lord to these bones. He hollers boldly:

v. 5-6

God doesn't *need* any help from anyone. God created the universe without any of us helping. But now, for reasons God neither explains nor needs to, he often chooses to act through someone's voice, or as we shall see, someone's hands and muscles.

John: Because at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus commands the bystanders, ***"Take away the stone."*** Come on. He's gonna raise the dead. Surely he can handle the rock himself. Wave his hand or something. But no, those standing around must move the stone. Now this isn't just a technical thing, a little human involvement for its own sake. Because as they quickly protest, the body has been there a few days, and, well, nature is taking its course, and its not going to be pleasant behind that stone. Nobody wants to encounter the smell of that tomb. So this is a step of very significant faith. And he underscores this when they protest. Jesus responds: ***"Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"***

And so, they removed the stone. It is one thing to say, Lord I believe. It is another thing to take a step of faith and do a seemingly "foolish" thing at the Lord's command, trusting that...its in his hands.

In both cases, with Ezekiel, and with the mourners at the tomb of Lazarus, God requires bold human participation at the pivotal and climatic point of drama, and humans respond in faith. They do the seemingly foolish thing, in obedience.

Now the result

Ez: read v. 7-10

John: read v. 43-44

As people of biblical faith, our lives can and must be lived from an orientation - an approach to life - based in the biblical texts and what they reveal about God, and what they reveal about God's interaction with this world. The voices of our culture and media and political processes and so on, form in us an orientation to life, but the biblical orientation is starkly

different. And it takes serious commitment and discipline on our part and Holy Spirit's work in us as individuals and as a community, to shape our orientation to life biblically.

These two dramas which we are looking at are shaping in profound ways:

-They give us the orientation that comes from the simple but profound fact that God cares. God is present with people, seeing and feeling what goes on, engaged to the point of tears in the affairs of this world. That is huge, the starting point really, in being people of faith. And it is a point that is constantly questioned and/or dismissed in our culture.

-And these dramas give us the orientation that our hope is grounded in the fact that God's word still has the power to create life, even in places where hope has been given up. ***Nothing is impossible for God***, the words the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary, are words that reverberate through Scripture and down through the ages into our own times and circumstances. It's a basic tenet of biblical faith that makes it reasonable to focus on possibilities rather than hopelessness, in any part of life, be it personal troubles or political issues or worldwide events. The dry bones coming to life represented a whole nation, a people of faith who by all observations had come to a dead end, but by God's grace were revived. The raising of Lazarus was a more intimate, personal situation, a family's grief, which Jesus entered and transformed beyond what anyone might have anticipated.

So the bar is set very high. The power of God's word might just have astonishing results.

-And we have also seen in these dramas that because of this grounded faith and hope, our lives can be drawn into God's plans and given over to God's limitless possibilities, as we become the speakers and actors of the life-giving word of God. And do so in ways that may seem to bear no hope of success by human calculations, but which always have significant implications in the accounting of God.

We, the community of faith, speak and enact the life-giving word of God into this world of death and hopelessness and cynicism. Fools for Christ we are, living out of a biblical orientation that is out of step with this world.

Recently I've been reading *The Naked Anabaptist* by Stuart Murray. Maybe you're familiar with this book already. If not I would recommend it to anyone interested in contemplating what it really means a member of the Anabaptist faith tradition as this congregation, and the many Mennonite congregations around here are. I'll make a few comments about Murray's work and why I felt it connected with what I've been drawing out of these biblical texts.

Stuart Murray attempts to strip away, as the title provocatively suggests, all the various outward clothing that Anabaptism has loaded on over the centuries, and rediscover the essence of this stream of the Christian church. What is the Anabaptist orientation? What did the first Anabaptists imagine the true community of biblical faith to be and look like? This question is particularly urgent for Murray, because we are, as he and most other commentators claim, living in a "post-Christendom" era. Christendom is expiring or has already expired. Now Christendom of course refers to that grand dream of a Christian society, a Christian culture, that has been so powerfully at the root of Western civilization for centuries. Christendom began in the 4th century when the emperor Constantine claimed the Christian faith, and the Roman empire became, officially, Christian. What a seismic shift that was for the church, suddenly being vaulted from a persecuted minority, into state-

sanctioned power and influence. And so went western Christianity from there on, church and state making a society together, pope and emperor, scripture and sword, evangelizing and conquering, baptizing and subjugating...Christendom.

Christendom is over, many say today. Western society has become fully secular, and the church no longer has any special status with the state. The church must once again, go it alone. It has been sidelined, a refuge for some, but irrelevant for most. In western Europe, grand churches are tourists destinations for those curious about an era past. Canadian society too, outside of Winkler and Altona Manitoba, is moving fast into secularism, with Christian faith belonging to the private lives of a minority of people. In the U.S. many still hold onto the dream of a Christian America, and Jesus is probably still draped in the stars and stripes in some zealous country churches. But prayer is disappearing from the public schools, for many a front-line issue in the fight to keep Christendom alive. Many grieve the demise of the Christendom dream.

But, says Stuart Murray, Anabaptists might just find this a good time to celebrate! After all, what did the first Anabaptists claim in the 1500's? They proclaimed by word and by their actions, that Christendom was a corruption of the Christian story. That marching to war under the cross and with the blessing of the church was a perversion of the gospel! The bible, they believed, gave no sanction whatever for the way in which the church and state were cohabitating. Anabaptists bore witness to a renewed gospel, in which followers of Jesus renounced the violence of the state, renounced the lust for power and control, and took up the cross of suffering and faithfulness once again as Jesus said. This, they believed, was the true biblical orientation. And for centuries, those in the Anabaptist tradition have carried forth the vision of a renewed church, a church of Jesus- followers, counter-cultural and perhaps persecuted, but uncompromising in the quest to live into the kingdom which Jesus proclaimed.

Anabaptists have been anti-Christendom from day one.

And we are living in the days when this once mighty socio-religious phenomenon is passing away. And we might say that the church in western society looks somewhat like the valley of dry bones which Ezekiel saw. Only remnants remain indicating what once was.

Or perhaps in the image from John 11, the stone has been rolled into place and the church has been entombed for good, as western society shakes off old-time religion and rushes forward in its mad quest for wealth and power and god-like supremacy. And Stuart Murray's book ought to challenge Anabaptists to step into this place of death and prophecy. Live prophetically in this very day. Proclaim God's life-giving word. Be the true community of Christ that seeks God's kingdom, a kingdom which involves radical love across all human boundaries, justice that unravels consumerist greed, care for all God's creation. Prophecy, says the Spirit, to us, as to Ezekiel. Proclaim the gospel. Live into the kingdom of God which Jesus lived into. Anabaptists are perhaps uniquely poised for this task, for it flows out of our heritage and indeed fulfills it.

Remove the stone, Jesus may be saying to us. Let the true church emerge, with renewed life, calling observers to faith, glorifying Jesus.

These ancient stories can call out to us today in many ways. They are stories that can shape our world-view, and stir up our imaginations and expectations of what it might mean to be followers of Jesus in such a time as this.

May God's Spirit breath life into God's people, and may we say yes to God's call and get involved in the current unfolding drama. Amen