

Gracious God, our way in the wilderness, guide us by your Word through these forty days, and minister to us with your Holy Spirit, so that we may be reformed, restored, and renewed; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I've had a lot on my mind lately. Between concern for my family, the congregation, worries about having enough food and supplies, getting exercise, and of course putting together a service for live streaming with a sermon, I find it's pretty easy to forget that it is Lent. Yes, we have the purple paraments up, but without our Lenten suppers and people talking about it, I've momentarily let it slip my mind. Someone posted a meme on Facebook recently that said, "I was not expecting to give this much up for Lent." It's true. I didn't, and I'm guessing most of you didn't as well, but here we are.

Lent is the season of introspection and repentance. Despite this, I think it's also a time of hope. Last week I used the text from Psalm 23, which is all about hope. This week's text from Ezekiel is very macabre, yet it is also a text of hope, for the people of Israel back then and for us today.

Ezekiel is alive during a very dark time for Israel. In our reading for last week, we saw a whole new beginning for the people of God, as Samuel anointed a new king who was a man "after God's own heart." Happy days were there again. But by Ezekiel's time it had been a long time since that high point in Israel's history and Israel has sunk low. Ezekiel prophesied during the last days of Judah and Jerusalem and on into the Exile. To put it into perspective, the number of years between David and Ezekiel are similar to that of us and the founding fathers of our country.

Ezekiel himself was exiled to Babylon in 597 BCE in the first wave of Judean deportees. For the next 11 years, he would deliver a message of gloom and doom to Judah (Ezekiel chapters 1-24) and the then surrounding nations (Ezekiel chapters 25-32). Then in 586 BCE Jerusalem fell, the Temple was burned to the ground, a second round of Judeans were exiled to Babylon, and the Davidic monarchy came to an end. Once news reached the exiles in Babylon that Jerusalem had fallen and the temple was destroyed, Ezekiel began to prophesy hope. From chapter 33 through 48 Ezekiel prophesies revival, restoration, and a glorious future as the redeemed and perfected Kingdom of God in the world. Today's text is perhaps the pinnacle prophesy of hope to a hopeless people. It is certainly the most memorable word of hope, because of its vivid imagery.

To understand the imagery, put yourself in their place. Their world had come to an end. Everything they had trusted, everything that had given their lives shape and meaning, was gone—land, homes, property, the Holy City, the Holy Temple, and, most important, their Holy God. Their God had been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians. Could it be that their God wasn't really Lord at all? Or perhaps their God had deserted them in their darkest hour. Could it be that their Yahweh had broken covenant with them and forsaken them once and for all?

Let's be honest. We are in an exile of sorts right now. In some ways it's a reverse exile, we aren't losing our homes, but we are required to stay in them, We have lost our sense of peace, some have lost their jobs, there is an economic threat to their businesses, many have lost their investments in the stock market, and most of us have lost a sense of security. Many of us are concerned that this is only the beginning, and things will get much worse, including people losing their lives, before it gets better. I think we can probably relate to what those ancient Israelites might have been feeling.

In our Lenten readings we have been following God's long campaign to defeat the forces of evil in the world, appointing One person to represent and redeem everyone—Adam, Abram,

Moses, and David. I'm sure the people in Ezekiel's time wondered, "Could it be that God has abandoned God's campaign to take care of God's people? Has the history of Yahweh and the people come to an end?" It sure looked and felt like it. We hear their despair in verse 11. "They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'"

This vision is God's answer to their despair. As we dig into it, notice the frequent use of two themes that run through and frame the vivid imagery: "Sovereign Lord" and "then you will know that I am the Lord." Because Yahweh is the Sovereign Lord, there is hope for the dry bones of Israel. When they see those dry bones live, they will know that Yahweh is their Lord who has not forsaken them.

Clearly, God has been listening to the people's lament. In response God's Spirit (the Hebrew is *ruah*, a word that echoes throughout this text) gives Ezekiel a vision that speaks directly to their feelings of desertion and death—a valley filled with dry bones. It was a place where death reigned; there was not one iota of life, not one speck of flesh on these bones, bleached dry by the sun. It was Death Valley.

But God asks Ezekiel a question, a deep question, a trick question? "Son of Man, can these bones live?" Humanly speaking the answer is clear. Of course not! But Ezekiel is in tune with God's absolute power over nature and nations and maybe even death, so he answers, "O Sovereign Lord, you alone know." Only God can bring new life to dry bones and to a nation that looks like dry bones, a nation that has lost all hope, that feels cut off from its God, wondering if there is still a God.

Well, there is, and this God is going to do a miracle using two means—words and wind, prophesy and breath, the Word of God spoken by a man and the Spirit of God. That is remarkable and typical for how God works. God could have given new life directly, but he chose to use the prophesy of Ezekiel and the power of the Spirit in the form of breath or wind. It has always been that way. The miracle of new life is always a result of the combination of the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

But make no mistake. Whatever means God uses to accomplish God's work, it is still always God who does the work. So, as we've seen again and again, God is completely in charge here. It is God who tells Ezekiel to prophesy. It is God who says he will breathe into the bones. It is God who attaches tendons and makes flesh come upon the bones and covers the skeletons with skin. It is God who gives this new life. God is the Sovereign Lord.

Some might ask, "Are you then saying that God created this virus that is holding the world captive and could potentially kill millions of us? Is this some sort of divine punishment for us?"

I am not saying that. Unfortunately, it is the sin of the world that is causing this pandemic, and it is not one single person that is to blame. The most realistic and logical explanation for this happening is that someone got the virus from a wet market in China. A wet market is a market where live animals are sold and killed right in front of the customer. These markets don't just sell the traditional domesticated animals, but they sell exotic animals as well. Many wealthy people think that these exotic animals have healing properties or will impart sexual potency on those that eat them. The conditions the animals are stored in at the market before being slaughtered are horrific. Disease can go from one animal to another and can mutate and jump to humans.

Whether it's the greed of those raising the animals, or the desires of the buyers, or the officials that are unwilling to crack down on commerce because it will hurt the economy, or are unwilling to send aid to certain states because of political differences, to major companies

lobbying the government not to force productivity, or those companies who refuse to offer sick leave and pay to their most vulnerable employees, to the person who refuses to quarantine themselves, or the person in the store who buys a cart full of toilet paper, masks, or other needed supplies, leaving nothing for others. We are our own worst enemy, yet God is still there to work with us and through us to make things better.

Ezekiel prophesies (the word is used 6 times) and the Spirit blows (the word ruah is used 9 times). As result, a very strange, even bizarre scene presents itself to Ezekiel's eyes. Bones rattle and come together. Tendons attach bone to bone. Flesh and muscle give strength to the skeletons. Skin covers all the skeletons. So, we have reconstituted bodies, but they aren't alive until Ezekiel prophesies again and the four winds blow life into once dry bones. And a vast army stands on their feet.

What does this vision mean? Is it a precursor to the resurrection of the body promised in the New Testament and guaranteed by Christ's resurrection? One could take it that way, because at the very least this vision shows God's sovereign power over death. But that's not the meaning God gives. These bones are "the whole house of Israel." This is not about the resurrection of individuals in the last day. It is about the restoration of Israel after the Exile. Currently they feel dead, like dry bones, buried in the grave of Babylon (note how God changes the imagery in verses 12 and 13).

You think that I have cut you off, that I am done with you because this terrible thing has happened to you. Well, here's a picture of your future, accompanied by a promise: "I will bring you back to the land of Israel. I will settle you in your own land." Your dry bones will live again in the land of promise.

"Then you will know that I am the Lord, Yahweh, your covenant God, your Sovereign Lord." This is God's answer to those of us feeling lost and wondering where God is in all this. We live in a great cloud of unknowing. We believe and we doubt, we hope and we despair, we simply don't know what is happening and how it will all turn out. Here is a picture and a promise that will help us know that God is still Lord, still keeping covenant, still sovereign over nature and nations and, yes, even over death.

No, this passage is not the end of the story. This text anticipates—even demands—God's future works in history proclaimed in the New Testament, like the raising of Lazarus (the Gospel lesson for today) and, of course, the resurrection of Jesus. The history of God's work with God's people is not done yet and won't be until we all stand upon the New Earth under the New Heavens in our resurrected bodies.

For now, we remain in exile, locked in our houses distanced from our community, from each other, still mourning the loss of familiar ways to find and meet God, but assured of God's presence. The standing multitude of dry bones brought back to life has a somewhat different connotation. Because God is present, we can breathe. And stand ready for the future, looking forward in hope. Amen