Lent 5

March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14

I had an English teacher who loved to talk about ‘tone of voice.’ She’d encourage us to imagine tone of voice as we read. She’d have us read passages aloud, trying different attitudes – sarcastic, sincere, happy, sad. While teaching us about how tone of voice adds depth to our understanding the written word, she cautioned us that what we imagined might not be what was intended.

We have a great example of the need for tone of voice in our Ezekiel text today, when God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And Ezekiel says, “O Lord God, you know.”

What’s his tone of voice? Is he optimistic? Is he confident? Is he hopeful?

We have lots of reason to think he wasn’t any of those, given the events of Ezekiel’s life and the situation that he and the people of Israel found themselves in prior to this story.

Ezekiel was born into a priestly lineage. His father, his grandfather, and so on, would have been priests. That’s what Ezekiel would have trained to do from a young age. It was his destiny. He lived his life confident of his future.

But then God called him to be a prophet, and Ezekiel found himself spending time delivering messages that warned the people of Israel about the consequences of disobeying God.

Still, he could have some confidence about his future.

And then came the Babylonians, who spent the better part of 2 years attacking Israel, wearing them down and subjecting them to famine, disease, and despair, before finally defeating them and forcing some of the Israelites – including Ezekiel – into two waves of exile.

Forced to leave his home and all he knew, Ezekiel continued to try to keep people faithful to God. But as the years wore on, hope faded. Ezekiel’s wife died. The temple was destroyed. Jerusalem was destroyed. The people of God were scattered.

Many people began to doubt whether God still loved them, still cared about their well-being.

So, no, I don’t think that Ezekiel was full of confidence and hope when he had this vision we hear about today.

I don’t think that he felt much reason to be optimistic about the future of his people. Like many of them, he may have wondered if God had abandoned them. He may have wondered if they would ever exist as a people again.

I think his reply, “O Lord God, you know,” was full of despair and hopelessness, pain and sorrow. Because what could possibly give him reason to have hope?

But then God asks Ezekiel to do the very things that God had called him to do in the past – to prophesy and to trust in God.

God didn’t ask Ezekiel to do something that he wasn’t not trained to do, something that wasn’t in his nature. Instead, God – who knew full well the gifts that Ezekiel had been given – called upon Ezekiel to be engaged in being **who he was**: a prophet. A prophet who had repeatedly reminded the people of the importance of obedience to God’s instructions, the importance of trusting that God would provide for them.

And God issued three commands to Ezekiel:

“Prophesy to these bones and tell them to hear the word of the Lord.”

“Prophesy to the breath, and tell it to breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

“Prophesy to these who have no hope and tell them that God will deliver them, and they shall live.”

As he was commanded, Ezekiel prophesied to the exiled people of Israel, who despaired so much that they cried out, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” And God did as God promised. Where there had been hopelessness and despair, God brought the fullness of life.

This story is paired with the raising of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. Together, these stories remind us that God brings fullness of life into our hopelessness and despair. Without their brother, Mary and Martha may have faced an uncertain future, given the limitations for women back then. We don’t really know much about their lives, other than that they clearly grieved the loss of their brother and that his return to them was the cause for rejoicing.

Jesus doesn’t dismiss the sisters’ reason for grieving. Jesus even cries with Mary, because he knows she’s in pain.

Similarly, God doesn’t deny Ezekiel or the people of Israel the sense of helplessness and despair they had. In neither case does God scold or chastise or offer any kind of suggestion that these people have no reason to be sad or feel hopeless.

Instead, God asks Ezekiel, and Jesus asks Mary and Martha to have faith, to trust. And because they did, they were witnesses to the glory of God’s Word, which – even if it falls on something dead – can bring it to life.

We’re no strangers to the feelings of hopelessness, to the yearning for a return to community, to mourning and sorrow and pain that Ezekiel and the people of Israel felt while away from where they wanted to be. And I don’t believe that God would deny us those feelings, scold us for wanting to join the lament in Ezekiel, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

But consider this: God could have re-formed those bones into humans without Ezekiel’s help. Because God sought an interactive and cooperative relationship with the people of Israel, God invited Ezekiel into the process and re-formed the community, delivering them from exile, where they learned again what it meant to be the people of God.

Who we are as a people now and going forward may be different, but the Spirit of God is still within us. We are still created with intent, given gifts to use for the common good, and invited into a cooperative, interactive relationship with our Creator, who is making all things new.

Even though we are apart, mourning the loss of our freedom to move about, to be with each other, we are – just as the people in exile were – assured of God’s presence with us. We are reminded that, into our hopelessness and despair, God brings fullness of life.

The way forward for the people of Israel was not easy, nor will it be for us.

But with God’s Spirit poured into us, we can make our way through the valley of the shadow, confident that we are not alone, assured that we will be restored.

May you find signs of God’s presence being made manifest in your life this week, and may those signs remind you that, with God, all things are possible.