

*Sermon for 9 March 2008 at Saint Ann's Episcopal Church ~ The Rev. Janie Donohue*

Today our lectionary brings us two stories that teach us important things about God, and about us.

The knee bone is connected to the thigh bone. The thigh bone is connected to the hip bone. The rest, you know. But what you might not know as well is the prophesy which inspired this memorable children's song.

The year is 557 BC—ish. The nation of Israel has been run out of Jerusalem and scattered in exile. It has been twenty years since this exodus and the people of Israel are losing hope. "Where is God?" they are asking. How could God abandon us in our hour of need? God promised to care for us like a dutiful and compassionate shepherd, to gather us like chicks under her wings...and yet. Here we sit, strangers in a foreign land, cut off from one another, from our national identity and from our worshipping community. Did God leave? Were there second thoughts? Have we been left comfortless?

The hand of God comes upon the Prophet Ezekiel. He is told to share this vision with the people. "God brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry." The Lord then leads the prophet round these bones and instructs Ezekiel to speak life into them. As he is speaking, "suddenly there is a noise, a rattling, and the bones come together, bone to its bone." The prophet looks, and there are sinews on them, and flesh has come upon them, and skin covered them" Then God instructed Ezekiel 'Prophesy to the breath,' tell the breath to Come from the four winds, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'

The Jews in Babylonian Exile were like those dead and dry bones, unlikely ever to come together to be so much as a skeleton, much less to become a living body. And to God's people in the wilderness, teetering on the brink of total despair, a word of hope is offered through the prophet—All is not as it seems. Wait for the Lord. Rescue is coming and you will have life again. And they do. Within 30 years the Persians welcomed home what was left of the dispersed Jewish Nation. God does act and their communal life is restored. But, in *this* moment, in the valley of the dry bones, all the Israelites see is their present reality. They are desperate, terrified and sure that God has abandoned them.

Our Gospel lesson today confronts us with a family in a similar state of crisis. Lazarus, dear friend of Jesus is ill. His sisters, Mary and Martha, also dear friends of Jesus, sends messengers to Jesus confident that if only he knew what was happening he would come and Lazarus would not die. Jesus reassures the messengers, telling them that 'this illness does not lead to death.' The disciples are comforted by this statement because, the last time they were in Judea, the Jews were so threatened by this prophet and miracle worker, that they tried to stone him. Thank God it is not fatal.

Two days later, things have changed. Jesus informs the group, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him.' Confused, the disciples wonder why Lazarus'

slumber warrants a return to danger for them. Then Jesus tells them plainly, 'Lazarus is dead. Let us go to him.' The disciples are struck at once by the implications of this turn of events. After what must have been a difficult, tension filled community discussion, Thomas says to his fellow-disciples, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.'

They go. And when they arrive, they encounter a family in profound mourning. Friends and family and neighbors weeping openly, devastated by grief. Mary and Martha are furious with Jesus. "Where have you been!!" If you had only been here, he would not have died. Jesus, deeply moved, begins to weep.

Where have you laid him?" Jesus asks them. "Lord, come and see." At the tomb, Jesus addresses the gathered community, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, ever the pragmatist reminds Jesus...of the smell... "He has been dead for four days." Take away the stone, he cries. They move the stone and Jesus, after thanking the Father for always hearing the cries of his heart, calls toward the tomb, "Lazarus, come forth!"

And he does.

We can only imagine the shock of the crowd, as sobs turn to silence. Jesus, has raised the dead. This does not happen. Only the messiah could make this happen. Jesus *is* the Lord, the Son of God. He has fulfilled his promise, and transcended our hopes and dreams. How could we have doubted? We have not been abandoned. God has not left us comfortless.

And then, for the disciples, the realization sets in...now, Jesus *will* be killed. As a prophet and teacher with a growing following, he was already source of concern for the Jewish Authorities. Now that he has brought a man back from the grave, the crowds will flock and it will be pandemonium in Jerusalem. We will enact that adoring crowd scene next week in our Palm Sunday liturgy, the triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Jesus has shown himself to be the prophesied messiah, the one who was to come, the King. Jesus is the one who raises the dead. It now seemed beyond doubt that the Jewish leaders would conclude that for the unity of the nation of Israel, this man would have to die. And he does. By raising Lazarus, Jesus had just given up his life, for his friends and for the world.

We sit, soaking in this humbling realization, as if in seats at a cinema, reflecting on this unprecedented sacrifice as the credits roll to the movie's haunting theme. And suddenly the film stops. And there standing before us, the hero of the film, the risen Christ. He speaks to us in the same authoritative voice with which he called Lazarus forth from the grave. "*Now You.*"

The work of Christ on the Cross initiated the re-birth of the kingdom of God on earth, but clearly when Christ ascended, the Spirit's work was not finished. The gates of hell had been trampled, but the kingdom had not yet fully come.

When Lazarus came forth from the tomb, his hands and feet were bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in its funeral cloths. He did stink. Jesus' command to the community gathered was, "Unbind him." Unbind him. You do it. Surely Jesus, who caused the blind to see and

revived the dead could have whisked away some smelly grave cloths? But this is not what he did. Not at all. Jesus called us to unbind our broken brother.

In Ezekiel. God does the same thing. You, speak to the bones. Could God not have spoken words of comfort to the people directly? Most certainly, but this is not the way of the God we serve. The uniqueness of the God of Israel made perfect through the new covenant in Christ, is that salvation happens in relationship with God. We participate with God in the remaking of creation. The prophet is instructed—speak to the breath. Call forth the breath from the four winds, to bring life to lifeless bones. Remember now, the world was flat. Calling breath from the four winds meant calling it forth from the whole earth. All the living were being called upon to speak as channels of the healing Spirit, to speak life. To speak breath into the bones.

It is our call, our *job* to work to restore one another and our fragile earth, to wholeness. To tend and care and wash and hold. This work is our charge. The resurrection is a beginning for us, not a finale. As Christians we are baptized into the Spirit who brought Lazarus from his tomb, the spirit who spoke life into dry bones, the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead, and defeated death itself. Paul reminds us in our epistle today that that same spirit which raised X from the dead resides in us, flows through us, and will equip US for the work of healing to which we are all called. We are commanded to move the stone. We are commanded to unbind him.

This restoration work is not a call that can be fulfilled in isolation. To be faithful *we* together must be willing to speak into the brokenness of the human family, to individuals and to nations... We must do so not only with our lips but with our lives, by giving up ourselves to God's service. *We too* must die, in order that others might come alive in Christ. Die to our selfishness, our vanity and greed. To our need to know and control what comes next. We must die to our smallness of vision and heart. To give up on giving up on individuals, communities, nations and situations. Like Christ, we are called to give our lives away for the healing of the whole world. To walk in the Spirit, and by our self-giving love, bring in the kingdom of God on earth.

Perhaps the most challenging implication of these texts, for the New England private and proud, is that we must allow the human family to speak life into our dead bones, our darkness which can at times teeter on the brink of hopeless despair. Our loneliness. Our pain. Lazarus was not asked to remove his own dressings, to unbind himself. That was left to the others. Like Lazarus we must allow *ourselves* to be unbound by the fragile, flawed and often misguided faith community in which we find ourselves. It is our charge. It is our job.

As we approach the end of Lent, meditating on the sacrifice and victory of Christ, may we consider with equal sobriety the call of God in Christ to renew and to be renewed, to participate in the remaking of the human community with Christ through the Spirit which raised Christ from the dead which now resides in and flows through us, through our breath. Teach us Lord to unbind one another, and to allow the healing touch of others to pull away our burial cloths. May we walk as Christ loved us and gave himself a sacrifice to God. Thy Kingdom come. *Amen.*

