

Sermon for March 29th, 2020

God Gives Us Hope

Since the beginning of the month our lives have been turned upside down as we try to adjust to all these new ways of living in the midst of this pandemic. We have been taken out of the world we know so well, and thrown into this foreign place we know so little about. Left to grieve over what was.

The image of the valley of the dry bones we hear about this morning is a startling image of how the people of Israel are feeling during the Babylonian exile. Their flesh is gone. Their bones are dried up. Ready to turn to dust. Their hope is lost. They feel completely cut off from their land, their families, their communities, their Creator. All they have left is their lament.

In our gospel, Mary and Martha notice that their brother Lazarus is really sick, and so, they summon for Jesus to come. Unfortunately, Jesus arrives to the scene a little too late. Lazarus has been dead four days. Martha is angry and confronts Jesus. Mary is wailing as she cannot hold back the tears when Jesus approaches her.

Death. Loss. Exile. Isolation. Does this too us. It gets us angry. It overwhelms us to tears. It is okay to feel this way during this pandemic. These are normal reactions for us to reflect in such difficult times.

What we see in our gospel is Jesus is no different than us when reacting to this injustice. Jesus is overwhelmed by all the grief that surrounds him. Jesus can no longer hold back the tears. Jesus weeps. Jesus is troubled. Angry at how much death/loss/exile/isolation impacts our lives in negative ways.

Throughout our lives we face moments of suffering where individually or collectively we feel like the Israelites. We feel like Mary and Martha.

Maybe you are grieving the death of someone you love, and are overwhelmed by feelings of anger and sadness. Or you are struggling with a mental illness and feel hopeless. Or you are trying to seek help for a problem you are facing and feel completely cut off from your community.

As a community we feel like we are in exile during these pandemic times as we hunker down in our homes. Some of us are angry at the situation. Some

of us are moved to tears as we see how many people are impacted by this illness. People dying. Losing their jobs. Being completely cut off from their communities. Feeling isolated and alone. Hopeless. As we try to understand more about this virus that has changed our world so rapidly.

We are facing the hardest times we have seen as a global community since the Second World War. Our bones are starting to dry up. Our anger and sadness are overwhelming us. We are all wondering where God is in the midst of this exile we are living through.

When we look back at our readings this morning we hear that during the Babylonian Exile God sends the Israelites a prophet named Ezekiel who comes to them with this vision of a valley of dry bones to show the people that God hears their cries. God is empathizing with them. God has not abandoned them. God is very much present as they face these troubled times.

Then God goes on to show Ezekiel that God will breath life into these dry bones. God will restore Israel from this exile.

Ezekiel's words are a reflection of God's words that continue to give hope to the Israelites that one day their exile will be no more. That God is their Creator who breathes life into them. Who restores them.

What the Israelites must have felt when the Persians came into Babylon liberating them? Inviting them to go home where they could reconnect with their land and their community. What we will feel when this pandemic becomes a part of our history, and we can reconnect with each other in the ways we want to?

In our gospel this morning, Jesus grieves with the people and then is moved to action. Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead giving the people hope that not even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

As Paul says in Romans, Jesus has breathed on us the Spirit, that empowers us as the church to continue to point people to the light of Christ. God's presence in our midst. To continue to speak and act in ways that give people hope.

As we walk through this exile together, as we grieve together, we are invited to remember those times of suffering in our lives where we witnessed God's presence, healing, and restoration. We are invited to look back in our history and see where God's presence, healing, and restoration was experienced by our ancestors. Remembering that God's healing and restoration has touched our lives before and will touch our lives again.

We are invited to cling to the words we hear in Ezekiel, that in the midst of our exile, God is present. God will breath new life into us. Putting flesh on our bones. Restoring us from this valley of dry bones.

We are invited to cling to the words we hear in our gospel, that in the midst of our grief, God is present. Weeping with us. Angry with us. Ready to act on our behalf.

We are invited to cling to the words we hear in Romans, that God has breathed on us God's Spirit. Dwelling in us always. Helping us face these uncertain times. Pointing us to where God is working in our world. Whether it is through the technologies that help us stay connected to our loved ones, or through the online support groups that help us support one another during these most difficult times, or through all the people that are giving their time and energy to make sure we have the essential things we need to endure, or through all the people who are putting their differences aside to help create policies to protect and support us as we face the impacts of this virus, or through our faith and faith leaders that encourage us to believe in God's presence and promise of healing and restoration. Giving us hope to live with creative minds and compassionate hearts. Calling us to share these stories of faith and promise with others reassuring them of God's presence, healing, and restoration in the midst of these troubled times.

Let us pray, loving God, please show your presence and comfort us as we face this time of collective suffering. Weep with us. Liberate us from this exile. Breathe new life into us putting flesh on our dry bones. Lift us from our anxiousness. Move us as faith communities to act with your compassion. And give us the wisdom and creativity we need to stay connected to one another and to you in this time of physical distancing.

Amen.