

Pentecost Sunday
May 31, 2009
Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14
Acts 2:1-21

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When I was growing up in the Los Angeles area, I could walk only a mile or so from my house and be out of the city, up in the hills. Often, when the weather was nice, I'd go hiking with friends. It was beautiful up there, and really rugged. There were miles and miles of steep hillsides, ravines and gullies. In the spring some of the hillsides would be covered with mustard weeds that would grow way above my head. Hiking through them was sort of like swimming. And in the summer everything would turn dry and brown.

You never knew what you might come across up in the hills—snakes, coyotes, the remnants of farming and ranching equipment that had been rusting out in the elements for years and years. I remember one time my friends and I found a sheep skull. It was sitting in the grass upside down, with the teeth sticking up. The bone was bare and bleached white, like it had been out in the sun for a long time. I imagined taking it home, that it would be really cool to hang on a wall. But picking it up, I saw there was still a little bit of skin and wool attached to the top of the skull. It was way more disgusting than cool. I decided not to bring it home.

The prophet Ezekiel had a vision a bit like that. Only instead of sheep bones, it was human bones. And instead of a single skull, it was a whole valley full of skeletons, scattered, dried out, and bleached by the sun. Sights like that were probably not uncommon in Ezekiel's time. He was a priest serving in the temple when the Babylonian armies arrived to squash Judah's attempt at asserting its independence. The Babylonians burned towns and villages, slaughtered the inhabitants, destroyed Judah's army, and laid siege to the capitol city, Jerusalem. There were probably valleys all across the land covered with the dead. With no one around to give them a decent burial, the bodies were left for scavengers to eat, and the scattered bones would turn white in the harsh, hot sunshine.

Ezekiel was one of the "lucky" ones. He wasn't killed when Nebuchadnezzar's troops took control of the city. But as a priest, as one of the educated leaders of the people, he was seen as enough of a threat that he was deported to Babylon. All of the leaders were taken away to the center of the empire, to live in the belly of the beast. And there they languished, knowing that their nation was destroyed, their homeland was occupied by foreigners, the walls of their city were knocked down, the temple burned to the ground.

That same fate happened to a lot of small countries that were defeated by the great Babylonian empire. For most of those taken away to live in exile, memory of their homeland faded with the years. A new generation was born that had no memory of a living culture in their homeland at all, and the people were eventually assimilated into Babylonian culture. They learned to live and dress like Babylonians, they worshipped the Babylonian gods. Babylon became their home.

But that didn't happen to the people of Judah. Instead, their faith in God helped them hold onto the memory of their homeland. They held on to their language. And most important, they kept trusting that the God who created the universe had a purpose for them—not just individually, but as a people. And it was leaders like Ezekiel—with his vision of a valley full of dry bones—that played an important role in helping the people of God hold onto their identity in exile, hold onto their faith while living through painful and difficult conditions. Ezekiel and others like him helped the people remember that God had promised their ancestor Abraham descendants and land and blessing. And even if the people felt dead and lifeless, like the valley of dry bones, God still had a purpose for them, to bring life and blessing to them and to the whole human family. And for the God who created the universe, an obstacle like the Babylonian empire wasn't really a problem at all.

Ezekiel's vision is strange and just a little bit creepy. There's a whole valley full of dried, disjointed, skeletal remains. But when Ezekiel spoke the word of God to the bones, they began to come together, toe bone to foot bone to ankle bone to leg bone... accompanied by this terrible rattling, scraping, screeching noise. And then sinews and muscle and skin. But there the bodies lay, with no life in them, until Ezekiel called to the wind, to the Spirit of God to breathe the breath of life into them. And the wind came from north, east, south, west, and the Spirit breathed the breath of life into those bodies, and they came to life. They stood up! And God explains to Ezekiel that these bones are the people of God. They have felt as if Babylon were their graveyard as a people. But God says, "I will put my Spirit within you, and you will live."

And when God brought that vision to fulfillment, it surprised and amazed everyone. Babylon had seemed like an invincible power. No one, not even mighty Egypt, had been able to stand up to Babylon. But then, in the space of just a few years, Babylon's power crumbled, and was swept away by the Persians. And the Persians allowed the Jewish people to return to their homeland, to rebuild the city of Jerusalem, to rebuild the temple, to begin to worship God again in their own land—because God still had plans for his people. God still had a promise to fulfill for the descendants of Abraham, to bring blessing to them and—through them—to the whole human family.

And God is still fulfilling that promise. Through those children born in exile, who returned to a homeland they had never seen, a vibrant Jewish community grew—a community that had learned to trust God through everything. They learned, from prophets like Ezekiel, that nothing is an obstacle for God, because God’s love is stronger than anything, stronger even than death. And out of that community, when the time was right, came Jesus, who embodied God’s love, not just for the descendants of Abraham, but for the whole human family. And through Jesus, risen from the dead, God is reaching out to renew and heal and bring life and blessing, not only to us, but through us to neighbors near and far, and to generations still to come.

Sometimes, life brings us to a place where we feel our future holds about as much hope as a valley full of dry bones. Perhaps we can feel Israel’s lament on our lips: “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Maybe it’s financial worries, or a troubled relationship, or health challenges. Ezekiel’s words speak as powerfully to us as they did to the people of Israel in exile 2500 years ago. The power of Babylon was not too much for God, nor was death on a cross. Not even our own fear, or failures or sin can stop God’s power to renew and forgive and make whole. The Spirit of God is working in us and through us to build up a community that embodies God’s love, just like Jesus did. The Spirit of God is working in us and through us to bring blessing, and a future full of hope, to us and to all. And even when we reach the end of this life, not even death is too much for God. We hold onto the promise of Jesus’ resurrection, that God’s love is stronger than anything, stronger even than death.

So today we sing, we give praise to God for the gift of the Spirit, who touches our lives now with God’s great power of love, who gathers us as a community to rejoice and celebrate God’s promise—for blessing, for life, for peace, for us and for all. Thanks be to God. Amen