Hope Dealer

May 19, 2024 - Pentecost

Lakewood Presbyterian Church

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Romans 8:22-27

Years ago, I was visiting my son and his family who lived in the District of Columbia over the Thanksgiving holiday. My grandsons were babies and I was very busy with them over the visit. Once, for about an hour, I snuck off for a walk to the Eastern Market and looked around. The Eastern Market has a number of independent artists who create and sell wonderful art. At one stall this t-shirt caught my eye. It was a long sleeve grey shirt and said: **hope dealer.** I found my size and I purchased it. For me it’s a “wanna be” tee shirt. I may not currently be a “hope-dealer” but I want to be a hope dealer. I’m trying to be a hope dealer.

We have plenty these days to destroy our hope. Foremost, are the wars around the world, which seem to have no end in sight. It is painful to watch people suffer around the world and to feel so helpless about it. Perhaps we feel helpless and hopeless about the dry bones of our politics these days. I was driving home two older members of our church last Sunday when Dottie in the back seat exclaimed “I’m a has been!” George in the front seat next to me chimed in “Me too, Dottie, that is exactly how I feel, like a “has been.” They have both been pillars and firebrands in our congregation, back in the day, and now they can’t see any point in their individual futures, believing that they have out lived their usefulness. Those who can’t see a way forward are often desolate with little hope for the future.

 Have you ever felt this way?  The people of Israel have. Their nation had split into two kingdoms: Israel and Judah.  The Assyrians had defeated the Northern Kingdom of Israel and many of its people were taken off into exile. Just over a hundred years later King Nebuchadnezzer invaded the southern kingdom of Judah and took those people into exile in Babylon. Ezekiel as a young priest was carried off with the first wave of captives. The Israelites were in captivity.  They had lost their land, their livelihood, their freedom, their national identity and most seriously of all, their faith.  They no longer lived in the land promised by God to them and their descendants. It was as if they were forgotten characters in a movie where the main drama had been played out. They had become completely hopeless.

 The hand of the Lord came upon Ezekiel and the Lord brought him to a place reeking of hopelessness: a valley of death.  Ezekiel was set down in the middle of a valley full of dry bones. This was what was left of a nation devastated by war. The bones were the remnants of warriors felled on the battlefield, denied a proper burial and their corpses were desecrated by carnivorous animals. Death had come so long ago, that these bones, and the scriptures tell us that there were very many of them, were completely dry…bleached dry. They were lifeless and impotent, desecrated and devoured.

The Lord asks Ezekiel “human one, can these bones live?” I think that Ezekiel expressed a great deal of faith when he responded “O Lord God, only you know.” I’m sure I would have stared at God in incredulous disbelief.  Ezekiel put the ball in God’s court to do the utterly impossible. Then God told Ezekiel to preach to the bones and to tell them to hear the word of the Lord.  The sermon script read like this: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live and shall know that I am the Lord.

 Ezekiel preached to the bones. Just try and wrap your imagination around that one!  Picture Ezekiel standing in the middle of death valley preaching to a massive pile of dry, bleached bones. I love that the restoration of the people of Israel resulted in messy, complex human bodies. I am imagining Ezekiel following directions. We aren’t told that he was filled with glorious faith. We are not even told that he had a vision for the future. We are told that he preached as instructed. He preached, and in the midst of his sermon there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. Ezekiel watched as sinews came on the bones, and flesh on the sinews and skin covered the flesh!  Wow!  Incredible!  But there was no breath in them.  God told Ezekiel to preach to the breath and say to the breath “Come from the four winds, O Breath, and breathe upon these slain that they might live.”  Ezekiel preached to the breath and the breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet and were a vast multitude!

 Connie Carvalo makes an important point about this passage. The restoration of God’s people is a communal one. This isn’t surprising she reminds us, as the ancient Israelites had a very collective perspective, especially in contrast to our modern individualistic society, but this communal perspective is part of the essential message of this passage. God does not command Ezekiel to resurrect only the heroes, those on the battlefield who had sacrificed to save another. All the bones came back to life, those that were good with a sword, and those that were not…the armor bearers and the servants…those that had tried to desert the battlefield and those who tried to save only themselves, those who begged for mercy and those who perhaps tried to join the winning side. This resurrection of Judah is for everyone. It is not a society of superheroes.

 While I have been pondering this passage, I have been reading a book by Christian Wiman, who teaches at Yale, entitled *Zero at the Bone, Fifty Entries Against Despair*. It is a collection of poetry and reflections. He includes this poem by Lucille Clifton called Slaveships.

Loaded like spoons

Into the belly of Jesus

Where we lay for weeks for months

In the sweat and stink

Of our own breathing

Jesus

Why do you not protect us

Chained to the heart of the Angel

Where the prayers we never tell

And hot and red

As our bloody ankles

Jesus

Angel

Can these men

Who vomit us out from ships

Called Jesus Angel. Grace of God

Onto a heathen country

Jesus

Angel

Ever again

Can this tongue speak

Can these bones walk

Grace of God

Can this sin live

 Wiman reminds us that slave ships did have names like Jesus, Angel and Grace of God and observes that this poem riffs off of God’s question to Ezekiel: Can these bones live?

Wiman believes that this is a promise of resurrection, both of individuals and a nation. The irony of Clifton’s poem “can this sin live” makes us want to shout “we hope not!”

 But, the poet’s rhetorical power is to harness this passage of the Hebrew Scripture to offer it’s hope. In terms of the poem, Jesus the man is on board Jesus the ship but he is in the hold. God, if, God was anywhere, was underneath it all, shackled and sweating with human terror. The poem, slaveships is not only a question about the limits of sin, but also a question about the limits of grace. Is it possible that there is a love deep enough that will transform the worst of human evils? Can this sin live?

 Is our resurrection communal? Generations of captured, brutally abused slaves and their descendants resurrected with the slave hunters, ship captains, human traffickers, owners and their descendants? Where does the hope live?

 Later in his book: *Zero At the Bone,* Christian Wiman tells the story of his father’s death. His father and his sister had been living together in a run-down motel room. Both of them heavily addicted to drugs. Though his father received about 70,000.00 a year in retirement from his time working for the state of Texas as a Psychiatrist, his addiction and mental illness had brought he and his daughter to this squalid motel room. After she found him dead, she stopped using. Certainly, she was ill for weeks, but slowly, week by week the talons that had for decades gripped her loosened and her soul slipped free. And brightened. As he finishes telling this story he quotes Marianne Moore: **Hope is not hope until all ground for hope has vanished.** Hope is not hope until all ground for hope has vanished.

 I really can’t imagine a more vivid portrayal of vanished hope than a valley of dry bones. And though he was probably not a very willing “Hope Dealer” God used Ezekiel to bring the bones back to life. In various messy stages, the human is reconstituted and regains life at Ezekiel’s call to the Ruach, the wind, the spirit which breathes life.

 In my own story as a hope dealer, I need to tell you that my dog ate my t-shirt. My hope dealer t-shirt, along with a list long enough of other precious things to create a spread sheet of my Golden Doodle’s misadventures. But hope was not lost. I got another t-shirt and reassigned myself the job of being a hope dealer because **I believe that resurrection is communal.** Even though we might feel as though we are the dry bones in this story, this passage calls us to take responsibility. It is our job to bring hope to hopeless situations and to call upon the Spirit of God to breathe life into them.

So when you reflect upon these endless wars, upon famine, human trafficking, racial injustice, our broken political situation…when you reflect upon whatever it is that you feel hopeless about, remember that hope isn’t hope until all ground for hope has vanished. Then put on your metaphorical Hope Dealer t-shirt and call to the four winds, to the breath, to bring new life to the situation.

May it be so. Amen