

Lent 5, 29 March

2020

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Show us New Life

First Mennonite

Church

(I posted a video of this meditation to YouTube. If you want access to it, email me and I will put you on my list)



Warm greetings

to all of you as we continue to practice physical distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic. Did you notice that I said physical distancing and not social distancing? I read an article earlier this week that argued changing the terminology would drive home the point that physical separation was key to flattening the curve and reducing the number of Covid-19 cases.

Keeping our physical distance from each other is hard, isn't it? This week I decided to speak to you from the sanctuary, mostly because I wanted to have a better background than I had last week. Last week's background was a bare wall. But, I will be honest with you. Being here in the sanctuary all alone is lonely. It's empty. This reminds me of the words of the first song in our blue hymnal, **What is this place?** The first verse says:

What is this place, where we are meeting?
Only a house, the earth its floor.
Walls and a roof, sheltering people,
Windows for light, an open door.
Yet it becomes a body that lives
When we are gathered here,
And know our God is near.

What this place needs right now is you. It needs the choir, the music, the singing, our praying together. This place needs us to gather together around Jesus, our Lord

and Saviour. This season of physical distancing makes this impossible, however. It's difficult not being together.

Our scripture reading today is from Ezekiel 37. The words of Ezekiel 37 we're written during a very difficult time in Israel's history. The tiny nation of Judah, with Jerusalem as its capital, was caught in the middle of tremendous geo-political change. It was a time of war and tremendous upheaval. The mighty nation of Assyria, who had controlled Judah for many years, was defeated by the Babylonian nation led by Nebuchadnezzar III. Nebuchadnezzar. Apparently, it was a popular name back then, as there were at least three of them!

At the beginning of the book of Ezekiel, it says that he was "among the exiles by the river Chebar" (Ezekiel 1:1). "Among the exiles" – Ezekiel was one of the prisoners which the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had brought with him to Babylon at the time of his first conquest of Jerusalem in the year 598 B.C. One of the strategic practices of Babylon was to take all the leaders and people with specialized knowledge and skill of countries it defeated into exile. So, King Jehoiachin and other leading personalities from Jerusalem were among the prisoners. Ezekiel was one of them as he was a descendant from a family of priests.

You may be interested in knowing that Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's ministry overlapped. Ezekiel was the younger of the two. Ezekiel was a prophet to the exiles in Babylon while Jeremiah was a prophet to the people in Jerusalem.

Many of the 598 BC exiles in Babylon remained optimistic despite their difficult situation. Many of them looked to the future with confidence, hoping to see peace, freedom, prosperity, and for them to return to the promised land quickly.

We need to understand the people's optimism. For Israel, the presence and the mercy of God was strongly tied to the land of Canaan, the Promised Land. This was the land which God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. It was the land to which God had led the Israelites, after delivering them out of Egypt and leading them through the wilderness. The Promised Land was a gift from God, and it was a sign of God's covenant with them. The land was filled with holy places where God had revealed his presence and given assistance—places like Jericho, Bethel, Shechem, Hebron, and of course, the city of David with the temple of Jerusalem, Zion. With all of this history behind them the people remain convinced that God would always protect the city and the temple. This is why they remain optimistic.

Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel spoke against this false optimism. Jeremiah, for instance, foretold the inevitable demise of Jerusalem and Judah. God himself, said Jeremiah, has long ago rejected his faithless people, and would use Nebuchadnezzar to put an end to it. God will open a door to the future only to those who will accept his severe command and go into exile.

You see, the people of Israel didn't have the same idea of God moving with his people as did the Mennonites during our wanderings. When the Mennonites moved from Holland to Danzig, then from Danzig to Russia, and then to Germany, Canada and Central and South America, we moved with the assurance that wherever we went God went with us, and we would be allowed in these new places to pray, sing, and build churches again, and to give our villages and congregations the old names, Bergtal, Altona, Schönwiese, and so on, because the same God was with us on our way.

Not so with the Israelites who were taken prisoner to Babylon. They didn't have the assurance that God was with them in exile. They needed the land, the city of Jerusalem, and the temple as the assurance that God was with them. After all, the temple was God's dwelling place.

But in **587 BC**, eleven years after Ezekiel and the first group of exiles went to Babylon, all of Israel's false confidence, false optimism, false hope, false theology came crashing to the ground when the Babylonians burnt and raised Jerusalem and the Temple to the ground. Any hope of shortly returning to their homeland was thrown right out the window.

Feodor Dostoevsky, that great Russian writer once wrote, **Totally without hope one cannot live. To live without hope is to cease to live.** I think these words would have resonated with the Babylonian exiles.

Ezekiel's compatriots asked:

- Why did we lose the land?
- Why was Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed?

And the most obvious answer at the time was, surely God is against us and wants the worst for us. Many thought that they had simply become victims of history, and that they could do nothing but throughout their arms in the air and say, it's all over we are no longer anything.

All of this is background to our passage in Ezekiel 37:1-14. For this passage is a message of **hope**. If you've ever dared to read Ezekiel, you will know that he has these incredible and bizarre visions and describes what he sees with amazing imagery:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he 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. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' (Ezekiel 37:1-3)

Let's stop and consider this passage. It's a picture of death. It reminds us of a battlefield. Many people had died in this valley and they have been dead for a very long time. The dry bleached bones had been exposed to the elements, the wind, the rain, and the sun for a long time. The Israelites in Babylonian captivity possibly witness such a scene of suffering themselves after the intense battle at Jerusalem, or had at least heard about them. Perhaps, some of you personally remember some of the horrific scenes of war. The finality of death could not have been presented more graphically. It was actually only one answer to God's question whether these bones could be revived: **No, it is impossible**. The prophets reserved answer, '*O Lord God, you know.*' expresses the resignation to the inevitable rather than hope for New Life.

Hopelessness. Is that how you or others are feeling during this Pandemic?

But God has decided differently. The following passage reminds us of the creation story in Genesis 2. The God who originally created humankind from the elements of the earth can also let a new creation arise from dead bones. The prophet is to be God's instrument. Let us read further:

Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: 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 you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says

the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

This is highly symbolic language. It is not the literal resurrection of the dead that is referred to here. The Old Testament says very little about resurrection and eternal life. It confines itself to the experiences of people with God in this earthly life and in history. And yet we recognize in this account a suggestion of what is to come. God is portrayed here, though the meaning is symbolic, as one who creates life out of death. In the time between the two Testaments—the Old Testament and New Testament—this became a teaching, and in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, God proved his authority over death. In light of the resurrection of Jesus, this vision of Ezekiel becomes a powerful symbol of the resurrection of the dead in the end times.

For Ezekiel's time, however, as we already indicated, this vision had a symbolic meaning. God immediately gave Ezekiel the key to the meaning of this vision:

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.' (Ezekiel 37:11-14)

So, the death spoken about here is the hopeless situation of the people of Israel. They have given up on themselves. In verse 11 it says: "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.*"

In Psalm 137 this mood is expressed in a song:

*By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
For there our captors
asked us for songs,*

*and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’
How could we sing the Lord’s song
in a foreign land? (Psalm 137:1-4)*

Death is a possibility not only in the life of the individual; entire peoples and societies can be, as it were, DEAD, though the expression, when used this way, has a symbolic dimension.

Some of you have lived through war, and are reminded of what it was like to be a refugee at the end of World War II. There were the battle fronts and the air attacks. In Germany, the cities were in total ruin. Disease and starvation were widespread, and the occupying armies, especially those from the east, filled those in Germany with fear. But just as serious, if not more so, was the apparent destruction of spiritual values. Safety, order, justice and injustice, hope—all no longer seemed to exist. Germany was dead.

There were little flickers of hope. It was still possible for individuals to live responsibly before God, and in this way to find new life in death. But the Spirit moved in other ways as well. Churches began to fill up. Relief work began. People began to reflect on what happened. Many experienced a new spiritual consciousness. The dead bones acquired New Life. God still acts in the same way Ezekiel said he would. Through God’s breath of life, God can create new life out of dead bones.

Here's another example. I think about the church in China. Before the Communists took over China in 1949, the church was largely controlled by western missionaries who were allowed to do their work because they had the backing and support of western military power. After the revolution, Western missionaries were forced to leave leaving the church in the hand of local Chinese. Then during the Cultural Revolution, which ran from the mid1960s to the mid 1970s, all religious activity ceased. All churches, Buddhist temples were closed. Many were torn down while others were turned into factories or warehouses. An old Mennonite church was turned into a movie theatre. Many people, including Christians, jailed. The Church in China was dead.

But many remained faithful. I have many stories I could share about faithful Christians burying their Bibles in the ground or hiding them in their sod houses so the authorities couldn't find them. And then under the cover of night, they would take them out, and by candle light, read them. Over time, the Spirit of God created

New Life from within. After the Cultural Revolution was over, people began to gather for worship. While the church is still under many restrictions, it is alive. God can create life of dead bones.

Today, as I look around this sanctuary, all I see is emptiness. It's lonely in here. It's dead in here. Maybe it's a good time for all of us to ask ourselves, what is dead that needs to be revived by God's Spirit? An awakening to a new life is always possible; it is always a gift from God and doesn't depend on external circumstances. Let us ask God to **show us new life**, for our community, our people, the worldwide church, and for all of humanity. The creator who made us can and wants to show us and lead us to new life.

Finally, these words from Ezekiel lift our eyes and widen our horizon. When we recognize how God at various points in history has revived dead bones, we learn to understand better and to praise God's workings in the world. We gain a wider field of vision for God's grace and his intentions, and this in turn helps us to take our own life's work, however small, upon ourselves with thanks, and to fulfill it as a small part of the greater plans of God.

To close this time, I would like to offer a prayer that was written by Carol Penner for the season we are in. The prayer is called Pandemic Prayer. Please join me in prayer.

“Pandemic Prayer” by Carol Penner

Great God,
you are an ever-present help in times of trouble,
and that's why we're praying now.
We are troubled and we're worried things
are going to get more troubling.
This virus is spreading around the world:
so many are seriously ill
or will be seriously ill,
so many health care systems are stretched
or will be stretched.
Be with front line medical workers,
give them courage to do their work
and keep them safe.
Be with public health officials
as they make decisions for the common good,
and politicians as they roll those decisions out.

Help us to be kind to one another,
because anxiety can make us snappy.
Help our communities to be resilient
and expansive as we reach out to help
all who are isolated and afraid.
In these times of shutdowns and slowdowns,
when travel is restricted or banned,
as routines are disrupted and we spend
less time together or more time together,
help us zero in on what is essential.
Thank you that love is also contagious
and stronger than any virus.
You will be with us,
and we will be with each other
in sickness and in health. Amen.

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Now may the Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon
you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you
peace. Amen