

Out of the Ashes: Peace
April 6, 2014: Fifth Sunday in Lent
Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45
Rev. Dr. Charles A. Parker

I. Introduction

Just a few minutes ago, Dona invited us to pray for those who were impacted by the shootings at Fort Hood this week and that is, of course, a sad event and made more poignant by the fact that the community has already experienced the results of a mass shooting.

Whenever we see violence in our community, we recognize that to be a sign of brokenness, a sign of our separation from God and from one another. We're spending this Lenten time together using our lectionary texts to look at areas of brokenness in our community, and we're going to talk for a few minutes about the issue of systemic violence and war, the culture of violence in which we live as Americans.

II. Dry Bones

Ezekiel's vision is a good place to start that dialogue because the central image of Ezekiel's vision is the image of a battle, a battlefield where all of the remains of the bodies lie dead and dried up. Ezekiel emphasizes the fact that the bones in the battlefield are very dry as a way of saying, "These are bodies are as dead as dead can be." It's not like one of those television shows where the heroes seem like they're going to die then all of a sudden takes a breath and wake up again. These bodies are dead, dead dead. So there's this central image of this ancient battlefield where Ezekiel finds himself and God invites Ezekiel to respond to the question, "Can these bones ever live again?"

The second level of this story is that Ezekiel is prophesying to a community of Israelites that is in captivity in Babylon. A community of people who have seen their homeland destroyed and their city of Jerusalem and temple burned to the ground and are feeling as though there is no hope in front of them, there is no life that they can see. So, they feel like these dried up bones; we've been dead and we don't know where new life can come from. And Ezekiel's message is that even in the midst of uttermost death, God is the same God who created and gave us life and is seeking to create life anew. So, there's a word of hope to those children of Israel in exile.

I think it's a wonderful image for us too when we look at the issue of violence and warfare because, I don't know about you, but I often feel fairly hopeless when I look at the degree to which we have become inured to the issue of violence. We just take it for granted because we don't think there's anything to be done. We have a moment or two of outrage when there's a mass shooting, and then we just go back to business as usual because we know that it's going to happen again. My children have never known a time when our country was not at war and I don't know if they will anytime soon. It's just become part of our culture, we are going to be at war some place, and there's a hopelessness about that. It's too big for me to deal with, it seems too intractable, and I don't see how I can have any impact on that.

III. Believing in Resurrection

Like Ezekiel, the writer of the gospel of John wants us to understand that Lazarus is dead, dead as dead can be. So Jesus waits four days, which in Jewish tradition was that length of time that the spirit hung around the body after death before

moving on to the afterlife, to emphasize the fact that Lazarus is fully and completely dead when Jesus comes to call him back.

Now, in the synoptic gospels in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus does a lot of healing and miracles throughout those stories, as well as periods of teaching. In John, the healings, the miracles, and the teachings are always very closely interrelated. John doesn't have any random miracles, he's got seven signs, miraculous signs that Jesus shares and at every one of those signs, John talks about the significance of the miracle. What does a miracle mean? Lazarus' rising is the seventh and final of those signs.

Then *John* goes into a lengthy conversation about what that rising of Lazarus means and what it means is that the power of resurrection that is going to be released on Easter Sunday down the road a little piece is active and that worked right in their midst in this very day so that God's ultimate goal for the world, the world of justice and peace, where swords are beaten into plowshares and where the lion lies down with the lamb is not something that is just down the pike a ways and we're waiting for it. The power of the resurrection to transform who we are and who our community is is active and present and working right now, in this moment.

Jesus asks Martha if she believes in the resurrection and she says, "Oh yes, I believe in the resurrection is going to happen someday and Lazarus I know is going to get raised." And he says, "No, it's happening right now. The power of the resurrection is present and working in this moment and I'm going to show you by raising Lazarus from the dead."

Janet asked the children why Jesus cried when he knew that Lazarus was going to be raised. He cried because sorrow and brokenness breaks the heart of God and as much as we desire to avert our eyes from it, our call is likewise to have our hearts broken by the violence and bloodshed in our day. There's so much of it and it's so regular and so overwhelming. It is easy to click off and not allow it to touch us. Jesus invites us to look it fully in the face, weep for the brokenness, and then become agents of God's resurrection power in transforming that brokenness.

IV. Getting Started

We live in an age and a culture of violence and we are called to look that violence in the eye and to become agents of reconciliation and change. That always starts, of course, with who we are, and where those violent places are in our hearts and minds. Amen? Because we all have them, we all have them, whether it expresses itself in intense anger at the person who cut us off in rush hour traffic or the woundedness of someone who hurt us that we keep replaying over and over again in our hearts and heads, or the frustration that we experience at work and we then take out on the people at home.

Where are those places where the seeds of violence start to take root in us? That's what's always the place to start that discernment and then working our way out, where do those places happen in our society and our community? We live in a culture where violence is an entertainment; our children see amazing amounts of violence on an ongoing basis as part of their culture. We live in a culture where violence often works itself out because of the ready availability of guns.

We will always have people in our communities who are mentally ill. Mental illness is a great tragedy and we work to solve it and work on people's healing who are wrestling with it, but dear friends, I'm going to suggest that when you had the inevitability of mental illness and ubiquity of firearms, you are going to have tragedies like Fort Hood over and over and over again. Part of our struggle is keeping our attention on trying to turn that around.

Whenever we have a crisis like this, we wring our hands for a few days. If there are a lot of children who die, sometimes it's longer; maybe we'll get a Vice President to be assigned to do something. But friends, our national love affair with guns is killing us literally, and we've got to turn that around. My esteemed predecessor Bill Holmes preached a sermon many years ago called "Public Enemy Number Two" talking about the incredibly unfortunate impact the NRA has on our national dialogue on this issue. I'm going to suggest that has not changed and I'm also going to suggest that the power of the resurrection is greater than the power of the NRA, that we can do things differently if we decide to.

I'm also going to suggest as we again broaden the circle, that we have become inured to the constancy of inner national conflict and warfare. And we just shrugged it off because we just assume it's the way the world works. There is an Op-Ed piece in this morning's paper written by a Syrian woman talking about the fact that we have completely lost focus on the conflict that's going in Syria. It had our attention for a couple of weeks when there were chemical weapons and now it's off of our visual radar. Jesus invites us to keep it on our visual radar because brokenness and violence and warfare are always a sign of our sinfulness and brokenness. We are

called to keep that in front of us because that's the only way that healing ever happens.

V. Conclusion

Dear friends, Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dried bones is not about bones. It's about the power of God's work to breathe new life into situations that seem hopeless and beyond our control and invites us, as does Jesus in this powerful story of Lazarus, to believe that that power is active and present and that we can tap into that, become channels of it, and start to transform our world. This vision is a vision that reminds every generation that the God who gives us life restores our life and invites us to be agents of that transformative reconciling power in the midst of a broken world.

Amen.