

<Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130:1-8; John 11:17-44>

*Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, O Holy One, our Rock and Redeemer. Amen.*

The question posed to Ezekiel is, “O mortal, can these bones live?” Which, when it comes down to it, is not the kind of question most of us have any experience with, or would expect to. I don’t anticipate ever being brought to a graveyard by the Spirit of the Lord and asked such a question. But the underlying question is one which does have bearing on us in our daily living and in our lives of faith, our community, and even our world, and that question is, “can anything good come from this?”

It’s a question that has floated on my heart and mind for some time now, observing and pondering various events in our world, in our region, in our lives. It is a question most all of us have lived with at some point in our own lives, wondering what, if anything, that is good might come from a difficult or challenging question.

For all we can surmise, Patrick was a normal, average boy. We know next to nothing about his childhood, up until he was sixteen, at which point he was captured from his home in Britain and taken to Ireland in chains, where he would go on to serve as a shepherd. It would be well within the realm of reality to imagine Patrick wondering, “can anything good come from this?”

Which, to me, makes his story that much more fascinating and engaging. The story of how he eventually escaped, returned to his home in Britain, and studied to be a cleric, following in the example of his father. And then, years later, how he received a vision in which God called him to return to the land and the people that enslaved him, and show them the depth of grace and love that can be found in Christ. The fullness of redemption and new life. O mortal, can these bones live?

But even that is not the end of the story. There is a church, near the spot it is supposed that Patrick returned to the shores of Ireland and established his first church building: Sloan Chapel in County Down. But even the church that stands there now, stone and wood, one a hill surrounded by trees on two sides and the vista of the land on the other two, is not the original church. The original church Patrick built was destroyed by Vikings as they raided through the region, and then rebuilt. Then that church, too, was destroyed, and then rebuilt again. O mortal, can these bones live?

Where is the hope in challenging and difficult situations? We could ask that question in a multitude of situations, but perhaps most notably it comes to mind in the face of death and loss, under the weight of grief and mourning. And this is true of everyone in the world, regardless of background or nationality or belief or age: where is hope in the face of death?

Jesus even shows us the depth of grief in the face of loss. Jesus! The One who we know will go on to face his own death in the crucifixion, and then go on to undo the power of death in the resurrection, even he will grieve alongside Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus. In such moments, Jesus' own example shows us that not only is appropriate and understandable to grieve, but also that in such occasions when we might wonder where hope is to be found, that hope indeed is on the horizon.

O mortal, can these bones live?

Ezekiel has been wondering where hope might be found. According to the word of the Lord he prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple at hands of the Babylonian armies, who would then take the people of God into exile and captivity. He bore the weight of such pronouncements, hoping that the people might turn from errant ways and return to God, avoiding such a reality, and then bore the weight of watching such events come to pass. He bore the grief of seeing the people taken, robbed of hope, bereft of spirit. Dry and dusty within their own spirits, hopeless and lifeless. The Valley of Dry Bones was not a literal valley filled with literal bones, but was a vision representing the state of the people - the state of their belief, their perspective, their spirit. In this vision, they were dead, and had been for a very long time, so long that the bones were dry and brittle. The people were without hope of restoration.

In the face of difficult and challenging situations, we are tempted to ask, to wonder where there might be hope, or what good might come from the situation. Our Scriptures, and our stories of faith and faithful people, show us that this is not uncommon or unique to any one of us; rather, it is perhaps one of the most shared, common experiences. But there is more to the story than just our grief, or our questioning of what might be possible next. This, too, our Scriptures and stories of faith show us.

This is what fascinates me about the life and ministry of Patrick. Not the stuff of legend such as driving all the snakes from Ireland, but his ability to look, time and again, at a difficult situation, a life-altering situation, and instead of seeing despair and stopping in that space, he saw hope for what was to come next. Not by his own vision or his own power, not through the works of his own hands, but from God.

Taken as a slave, he escaped, and then he returned in the love and grace of Christ. Building a church, he instilled in the people such faith that, when it was destroyed, they rebuilt it, and then rebuilt it again. They were able to live into this calling through the hope they had received in Christ, for in Christ, hope had entered the story. No longer would the story stop at despair, or grief, or challenge and uncertainty. Now, hope would define the next chapter and the ongoing reality.

As Meg Jenista writes in her commentary on our Ezekiel reading, “Hope has been placed on the stage and the story isn't complete until hope is realized. The story doesn't end in the darkness of eclipse and death. The story ends...in the light of daybreak and resurrection life.” In response to the question of whether these bones can live - dry, dusty, lifeless bones without hope - Ezekiel responds, “only you know, O Lord.” And

what does God do? Breathes life back into them. Restores them. Provides them with hope that is not only proclaimed and imagined, abstract as an idea, but rather is tangible and lived out, hope made flesh and breath and vital.

And then Jesus does much the same. Coming to Bethany, joining with Mary and Martha in a moment of grief, Jesus offers the hope of life. Comforting Martha, proclaiming that he is the Lord of life and death and life anew, Jesus invites her to claim and live into this promise, as well. “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. *Do you believe this?*”

Do we believe this? O mortals, can these bones live? When we feel brittle or grieving or overburdened, in the face of hopeless situations and uncertain futures, can our dry spirits live? Our calling in faith is to believe this, and in believing, to live the truth of it all. May we hear, live, and proclaim the good news we have received. Amen.

*(Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Jason Cashing at Clarence Presbyterian Church)*