

December 10, 2017

Ezekiel 37:1-14 – Advent 2: Peace

I have been a little worried this week wondering if **all the excitement of last week's story**, *Shadrach, Meschach and Abednego in the Fiery Furnace* could be matched today. Between the **children's anthem and song**, and the video clip with Louis Armstrong, and all the stories I heard later about some of you in the production of *Kool in the Furnace* many years ago, it seemed that it was a memorable day scripturally. **That's** what a preacher dreams of – conversation and comments about the sermon afterwards!

But you do remember that I said it was a story of resistance, right? A story told to give the Israelites courage to worship their God in the face of oppression and tyranny. A counter-cultural story that might help us navigate through our own lives this year as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ.

Today, we hear a story that was told to give the Israelites hope in a time of deep despair.

In the Narrative Lectionary readings, we are still reading from the books of the Hebrew prophets, and the Israelites are still in exile. We have spent many

weeks this fall looking at that particular time period in the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament.

Commentator Corrinne Carvalho **writes that ...** "The Book of Ezekiel ... centers on the oracles of a former priest of Jerusalem who has been exiled to Babylon. His oracles ... span the years leading up to and **immediately following Babylon's utter destruction of Ezekiel's former city. The language of the book bears the scars of ... a collective trauma.**

The book's poems are verbal icons, using graphic verbal images to paint vibrant pictures. From the opening vision of God on a chariot throne to the final description of a city renewed, the Book of Ezekiel is visual in its orientation. The messages that the prophet relays are not just ideas but visual metaphors.

The first half of the book contains poetic oracles that describe the horrors of those years in unflinching detail ... Perhaps the most well-known passage from Ezekiel is this vision of dry bones brought to life with the breath of God. Within the Christian tradition, this passage was read as a depiction of resurrection. Such an individualized reading, however, is countered by

verse 11 which explicitly states that this is an image of the restoration of the nation as a whole”.¹

When **today’s reading begins, the Jews are away** from their homeland, which no longer exists, and the temple, the centre of Jewish life, has been destroyed.

I wanted to have the reading dramatized because **I think it’s important to hear that the reading is a reflection by Ezekiel about a conversation that he had with God when God showed him a vision, a message of hope, by asking Ezekiel “can these bones live?”**

This was a dramatic vision about the people of Israel, captives in Babylon, whose faith had long ago dried up like the bones in the vision.

Notice that the vision is not just about resuscitation, like The Walking Dead or any number of zombie movies or TV shows, where dead corpses come to life. It is a vision of tot restoration. It is about wholeness and recovery. Things are different than before.

I often hear folks say that they don’t like reading stories from the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Old Testament, because they think that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment, punishment, and law,

and that the God of the New Testament is a God of mercy, grace, and new beginnings. But this passage from Ezekiel is a great example of that second portrayal of God – a God of mercy, grace and new beginnings.

And it is the breath of God that brings about this restoration. It is interesting to note that in the 14 **verses of the reading, the word “breath” occurs nine** times.

But what do we take from this story of dry bones coming back to life with the breath of the Spirit on this second Sunday of Advent 2017?

I want to read you something from the wonderful Franciscan theologian Father Richard Rohr, from the Centre for Action and Contemplation.

(Video: Richard Rohr shares the meaning of Christmas from a Franciscan perspective)

<https://cac.org/faculty-advent-messages/>

“We’re always waiting for matter to become a new kind of apparition in which spirit is revealed.”

I leave you with a poem by Judyth Hill, called Wage Peace. It reminds us, in the busyness of the **season, to breathe ...**

¹http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1820

Wage Peace

Wage peace with your breath.

Breathe in firemen and rubble,
breathe out whole buildings and flocks of red wing
blackbirds.

Breathe in terrorists
and breathe out sleeping children and freshly mown
fields.

Breathe in confusion and breathe out maple trees.

Breathe in the fallen and breathe out lifelong friendships
intact.

Wage peace with your listening: hearing sirens, pray
loud.

Remember your tools: flower seeds, clothes pins, clean
rivers.

Make soup.

Play music, learn the word for thank you in three
languages.

Learn to knit, and make a hat.

Think of chaos as dancing raspberries,
imagine grief
as the outbreath of beauty or the gesture of fish.

Swim for the other side.

Wage peace.

Never has the world seemed so fresh and precious:

Have a cup of tea and rejoice.

Act as if armistice has already arrived.

Celebrate today.²

Can these bones live?

Of course they can. Thanks be to God.

² <http://voiceseducation.org/content/judyth-hill-wage-peace>