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SUNDAY: Lent 5

SERMON: New Life in Dry Bones

Text(s): Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-45

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In 1978, while serving a predominantly Chinese congregation in Malaysian Borneo, Carol and I and our children were with our large youth/young adult group on a three-day retreat at the seaside near the mouth of the Sarawak River. Though there is now a four-lane highway connecting our city of Kuching to the seaside, a mere eighteen miles away, in those days, you had to get there by taking a passenger boat. It was the equivalent of a bus, and like a bus, it stopped at every village along the way to take on or drop off passengers and cargo, so that it took about three hours to wind our way out the river from town to the beach.

As our launch approached the large government-owned guest house where we were going to be having our retreat, we passed very close to another boat moored in mid-stream which had a Malaysian marine police boat tied up alongside it. It was a typical Southeast Asian wooden fishing trawler, perhaps 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. Covering its deck was a makeshift roof of boards covered with palm thatch and flattened tin made from 5 kilo powdered milk tins. The boat was crammed to the gunwales with people—grandparents, middle-aged men and women, and many young children and teenagers. They were Vietnamese boat people, part of the massive exodus from Vietnam after the war. They were some of the fortunate ones. They had survived storms at sea, had evaded the bands of rapacious pirates off the coast of Thailand, and had finally made it to one of the few countries in the region which would at least allow their boat to enter its territorial waters. But even in Malaysia, they were not permitted to land or get off their boat. We spoke with some of the villagers who told us that the refugees had been there for several weeks already, and that there were 64 people on that small fishing boat. Once

a day, the marine police would escort a few of them off the boat into the village to get fresh produce and other foodstuffs which the Malaysian government was providing, and they would occasionally allow the children and teenagers to kick a soccer ball around on the beach, but by-and-large they had to stay on the boat until the government decided whether they could make room in one of the already overcrowded refugee camps or whether they would turn them back out to sea because there was no room. Day after day, in the broiling heat of the tropical sun, these refugees sat packed together under the shade of their makeshift roof, with nowhere to go, nothing to do, completely without hope or expectations, stoically awaiting the decision of some government bureaucrat in some government agency who knew nothing of their suffering, to decide their fate.

That scene came back to me when I read again Ezekiel's powerful vision of the valley of the dry bones that is our Old Testament lesson today. The voice of the exiles in Ezekiel's vision perfectly expresses what those refugees must have been experiencing: "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.*" That expression of hopelessness and bleak despair is heard all around us in our world today. From the forgotten and starving thousands in Darfur in the Sudan to those who have lost their families in the tsunamis in Aceh or Sri Lanka to the sweatshops in the barrios of Tijuana or Chihuahua, we hear the lament of the valley of the dry bones. It confronts us daily on our TV screens and newspapers until we become almost numb and do not hear or see it any longer, because we know there is little we can do about it.

It also confronts us closer to home. There are some valleys of dry bones right here in in Maine, particularly in "the other Maine," the one that begins about fifteen miles inland from the coast, or even along the coast further downeast in Washington County, the poorest county in the nation at last report. There are young people unemployed and unemployable who are full of

hopelessness because life seems to be passing them by.

But that lament of Israel's exiles, though it often is heard as the cry of whole nations or groups of people, is also always the cry of individual people. We may look at the problems of hunger, of war, of unemployment, of ethnic violence, of racism, of domestic abuse, of the breakdown of family values or corporate downsizing, and talk about them on the large scale, but we should never forget that those ills are experienced on a much smaller, more personal scale by individuals. The lament from the valley of the dry bones is not only a chorus; it sounds forth as well in solo notes from individuals who are so broken, so hurt by the circumstances of life, that they lose hope and fall into despair.

We hear that lament on this more personal and individual scale in the story St. John tells us in our gospel lesson of Mary and Martha and the death of their brother Lazarus. They seem to have been reasonably comfortable; they owned their own house. They appear to have been well-connected socially, because many people came to share their grief when Lazarus died. Yet, listen for only a moment to Martha and Mary's first words to Jesus when he arrives on the scene. Both of them say the same thing, though they say it individually: "Lord if you had only been here, my brother would not have died." If only. . . Haven't most of us uttered words like those, or felt that sense of hopelessness in the face of some great loss or tragic turn in our lives? If only things had been different! What Mary and Martha are expressing is the experience of every sufferer who feels abandoned to some cruel and meaningless fate. Suffering, real suffering, not just the normal ups and downs of life, but real, undeserved, and incomprehensible suffering makes us feel alienated and alone. And if we feel separated from others, we feel separated from God too. That's the real reason the bones are dried up, isn't it? God is absent. Without some sign of God's presence, there is only

hopelessness and a deadly dryness. We are in a waterless desert where all we can do is sit and wait—and even our waiting is without expectation that things will get better. We're just arid, resigned, dry, without life or hope of life.

C. S. Lewis, in a profound passage in the last book he wrote before his death and shortly after his own tragic loss of his wife Joy Davidman, expresses this lament in a most moving statement. He is writing to his friends Malcolm and Betty who are waiting in anguish for medical test results that could reveal that their little daughter has a fatal disease. Lewis reminds his friends that even Jesus knew this sense of hopelessness and abandonment. In particular, he comments on Jesus' own cry from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Speaking of that cry of dereliction, Lewis writes, *This is the human situation writ large. These are among the things it means to be [human]. Every rope breaks when you seize it. Every door is slammed shut when you reach it. To be like the fox at the end of the run; the earths all staked. As for that last dereliction of all, how can we either understand or endure it? Is it that God Himself cannot be [human] unless God seems to vanish at the hour of his greatest need? If God will create, he will make something to be, and yet to be not Himself. To be created is, in some sense, to be ejected or separated. Can it be that the more perfect the creature is, the further this separation must at some point be pushed? The 'hiddenness' of God presses most painfully on those who are in another way nearest to God, and therefore God Himself, made man, will of all men be by God most forsaken.* (Letters to Malcolm, Chiefly on Prayer)

If we haven't all been there, we will. Even in our well-cushioned economic comfort in the richest nation in the world, it belongs to us as human beings to know, sometimes too graphically and intimately for words, that sense of having been abandoned to meaninglessness and futility and hopelessness.

The lament of the exiles from the valley of the dry bones is not the end of the story, however. Nor is Mary and Martha's plaintive "If only." Nor, in fact, is Jesus' own agonized cry of abandonment from the cross the last word.

To the exiles down in Babylon, their homeland conquered, their families dispersed, their hopes cut off, Ezekiel's vision brought them a new word: "*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 your land. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and I will act.*"

To broken-hearted Mary and Martha, who are inconsolable in their loss, even by their many friends and amid their material comforts, comes this word, "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who trust in me, even though they die, shall live, and those who live and trust in me shall not die forever. Do you believe this?*"

The key to hearing this word of promise is in that four-word question: Do you believe this? In the answer to that question lies the ultimate difference between dry bones and living people, between despair and hope, between death and resurrection. Do you believe this? Not believe with your intellect; this kind of belief is not mental assent to an idea or a theological proposition. The term believe here has the sense of ultimate trust. Do you trust that God is the God of the living and not of the dead? Do you trust that out of the hopelessness and futility of the valley of dry bones, God can re-create new life?

You see, it is not only what we bring to our situation, not what resources of courage or perseverance or resolution that we can muster up when we're in the valley of dry bones that can turn the dry bones into living flesh. Even the sympathy of friends, helpful though that may be, that cannot by itself heal the grief of loss or fill the empty void with meaning. Hope does not so

much spring up from some innate inexhaustible source. Hope is not the product of favorable circumstances. Hope is a gift. Hope is the work of the Spirit of God. Hope is the life the Spirit breathes into our dry bones. The God of Ezekiel, the God of Mary and Martha and Lazarus, is a God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that do not exist. And this divine gift of hope always comes to us from beyond ourselves and often from an unexpected quarter. Other people are most frequently the agents through whom the Spirit breathes the breath of new life into us. When we reach out to others who are in the valley of the dry bones, we are carriers of hope.

Hope came to some refugees on a Vietnamese fishing boat from a source they could not have expected. How could they have guessed or anticipated that fifty Chinese young people from a church youth group would turn up where they sat crowded, waiting, stoically enduring their fate and become a sign to them that they were not abandoned?

Throughout that three-day retreat, as we had our Bible study sessions and our games and our times of silence, those refugees on the boat just off the beach below us were not only in our eyesight, but on our minds and hearts as well. Some of the youth began to pray together for them and talk about what could be done to show Christian compassion solidarity. Finally, they decided to go to the Marine police who were guarding the boat and ask permission to give some of our food to the refugees. The police at first were a bit hesitant, not sure how this sign of encouragement would be perceived by their superiors who were trying to discourage the boat people from coming to Malaysia. But they finally said that when we left the retreat, we could draw alongside and offload whatever food we had. Of course, we had brought much more food with us than we really needed, and we had a plentiful supply of rice and dried fish and canned curries and a fair amount of fresh fruit

and vegetables as well as tins of cookies and powdered milk and canned drinks.

So when we drew alongside the refugee boat, at first, they just stared at us, with little expression on their faces, but then some of them who understood Chinese, grasped what it was this group of teenagers wanted to do. They quickly spread the word, and the transformation that came over that cramped boat full of refugees was astounding. Smiles broke out on their faces. Everybody was talking at once. The younger men and women formed a human chain to pass the food from our boat to theirs. Even some of the police got in on the act, and helped unload the food. Many of our youth dug into their pockets and gave whatever money they had, and several of them spoke to the people and told them that we were praying for them and would continue to pray for them. I saw hope come to those people that day. I saw it in their faces, in their eyes. It came unexpectedly as a gift, it came like a fresh breeze, the wind of the Spirit, from a group of young people whose love for Christ gave them the ability and the desire to reach out to share that love with some people in the valley of dry bones. And with hope, came life. Those people began to live again. The life was in their eyes, in their smiles and tears of gratitude.

And life can come back to each of us in our own valleys of despair or hopelessness, when we answer the question that Christ asks us as he asked of Martha so long ago: Do you believe this? If we can say, with Martha, “Yes, Lord, I believe,” then we will have given God the freedom to give us the gift of Spirit and we will know, in our own experience, the living hope expressed in the words of the old spiritual the choir sang earlier:

Dem bones, dem bones gonna walk around.

Now hear the word of the Lord!