

Wesley United Methodist Church
Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
Lent 5: Looking for Love: Love for the Liberator
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 11:1-45

Sometimes the things we think offer love are actually things that bind us, preventing us from a full and whole life, and from offering our best love to the world. Sometimes the things that we think offer love actually cause our spirits or a part of us to die.

As we draw near the end of the Lenten season, our scriptures today show the resurrection power of God bursting out in both the Old and the New Testament.

The people to whom the prophet Ezekiel was speaking were people who had lost their vision and hope. They were living in exile far from their homeland and in circumstances that seemed hopeless. Once, they had been a people full of life and hope, but now they were devastated and drained of every ounce of energy. They had no hope of pulling themselves together; no hope of their lives ever being different; no hope of once again becoming the community that they had been. If not physically dead, they were spiritually and emotionally dead.

It is in this situation that God speaks to the prophet Ezekiel and gives him a vision that is still powerful today. Imagine the scene, a valley filled with dry bones – not dead bodies, but dry bones – bones that had been there for long enough that the rest of their body was gone. That’s pretty dead!

God speaks to Ezekiel and asks if these bones can live again. Ezekiel being a wise man and knowing that he is speaking with God, didn’t yell out, “Of course not! How could you even think such a thing?” Instead

his response is, “O Lord God, you know.” Even in the midst of such devastation and death, Ezekiel must have recognized that God can do great things and he was not going to put limitations on God.

I remember singing a song about these bones – “Dem bones, Dem bones, Dem dry bones, Now Hear the Word of the Lord.” The song continues for several verses but the refrain is always, “Now Hear the Word of the Lord.” It was the Word of God that starting everything. God spoke to Ezekiel. God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, to say to them, “Hear the word of the Lord.”

It was the word of the Lord that gave new life to the bones. It was the word of the Lord that breathed breath into the bones after they had come together in the vision. It was the word of the Lord; the Spirit of God that created new life once again.

There are times in our lives when we need a new vision; when we need new life. There are times when we need a vision of hope and possibility. We can experience this as individuals or as a community, a congregation, or a nation. There are times when we look for the one who will cast a vision, offer hope and promise and help to unbind us from the despair or whatever it is that has caused hope and life to die within us.

Shokoi Yokoi spent 28 years in a prison. It was not a prison with walls but a prison of fear. Near the end of World War II, Shokoi was a Japanese soldier on the island of Guam. He was afraid that defeat would mean capture and death at the hands of the American soldiers. He and his companions retreated into the woods and hid in caves. Through the next 20 years the other men died, and the last 8 years Shokoi was entirely alone. He was still afraid of being taken prisoner, so even though he had learned that the war was over, he continued to hide in a cave.

He was eventually discovered by some hunters but they had a hard time convincing him that he was not going to be taken prisoner or killed. Eventually he returned to Japan a national hero but for the rest of his life, he was never really able to fully adjust to life in modern Japan. He had lived for over a quarter of a century bound by fear.

There are too many people in our world who continue to live in prisons of fear, who continue to be imprisoned by circumstances or emotions that suck all the life out of them.

There are people who dread going to work each morning knowing that they will be treated poorly or that there is something about their job that saps their energy. There are children who are afraid to go home because there is a parent or caregiver who is abusing them. There are women and men who are bound by chains of domestic violence. There are people who have been looking for jobs for so long that they no longer believe that finding a job is a possibility. I could go on but you get the idea. There are too many people who while physically walking around are dead or dying inside.

To them, to each of us, the Word of the Lord comes just as it did to Ezekiel and to the bones in his vision.

Lazarus was dead. There was no doubt about that. His sisters Mary and Martha had sent word to Jesus that “the one you love is ill”. One might have expected Jesus to rush to his friend’s side; although one could also understand why he might not go. There were threats against Jesus’ life and going to Bethany, so close to Jerusalem, was probably not the smartest thing to do if he wanted to stay alive.

In John’s Gospel, Jesus is generally shown to already know what has happened and what will happen and what the larger meaning to it is. His

response to his disciples when he was told about Lazarus' illness was, "This illness does not lead to death, rather it is to God's glory, so that the Son of Man may be glorified through it." You may remember last week, the story of the man born blind and Jesus statement that it was so that God's works might be revealed. In John's Gospel, every human contact from turning water into wine right up to raising Lazarus was about offering people fuller, more whole, joyful lives.ⁱ

John tells us that "though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." By the time Jesus arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had been dead for four days. This is significant because Jewish belief was that the soul of the deceased lingered with the body for three days. By the fourth day, the soul would have departed and the person was really dead.

Yet, Jesus shows up and after conversation with both Martha and Mary in which he asserts that he is the resurrection and life, he goes to the tomb and calls to Lazarus "come out". The Word of the Lord, speaking life once again into one as dead as one could be.

This miracle was a turning point in Jesus' ministry. There were some who were already looking to kill Jesus, but after this event that brought many people to believe in him, it also launched the serious plot to kill him.

Still, even though the plot to kill Jesus became stronger and the implementation of it more imminent, Jesus' death took place so that the final liberation could happen. Lazarus, while raised from the dead, would one day die again. The other people who Jesus raised from the dead during his ministry, would one day die again. Jesus' death was the final word from God that death does not have the final word. Jesus rose from the dead, not to die again but to live forever and so that we might also live.

Jesus rose from the dead so that we could be liberated from whatever it is that binds us.

Whatever it is that feels dead inside you, can be liberated by God. It may not be as dramatic as Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, or as Lazarus walking out of the tomb still wrapped in the shroud of death clothes. It may not appear to others as something dramatic but eventually it will seem like a dramatic miracle to us. Sometimes liberation happens immediately and dramatically, but most often it happens slowly, one step at a time, one day at a time. Sometimes it is only in looking back that we can see the dramatic liberation that has taken place.

There is a new commercial airing on television from The United Methodist Church. It shows a young girl speaking and this is what she says:

"A miracle is an everyday extraordinary. It's when you find the strength you didn't think you had. It's when you find hope when you thought all was lost. It something that happens every day. Every time you say you can, when you're struggling, that is a miracle. That's the Holy Spirit inside you."

Then the screen shows these words: Children believe in miracles. What would the world be like if we all did? We believe that together through God's love, we can experience the miracle of Easter."

What would the world be like if we all really did believe in the miracle of liberation, in the miracle of the love that God has for each of us? What would the world be like if we were to share that vision and that love with the world around us? I want to invite all of us to help share that miracle with others this season. One simple way to do that is to simply take a few of the invitation cards we talked about at the beginning of worship and give them

to someone you would like to invite to experience the liberation miracle of Easter. We can also do this by sharing the ways that God has worked in our lives in the past and in the present. When we are open to it, we discover that God offers us unexpected opportunities to share or witness to our friends or family about the ways that God has made a difference in our lives. So, please do take the opportunity to tell others about the everyday miracles of liberation.

Yet, even while we are witnessing to others, there are also likely parts of our lives that need liberating. There may be parts of our lives where we also need to be reminded of the miracle of liberation, the miracle of love. Let me share with you the words I received in one of the daily meditations this week from Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes:

There are parts of you,
maybe great parts,
that have withered and died.

Maybe spiritual gifts that you have buried,
a face of yourself you have closeted,
wounds ignored, hopes starved.

Some have passed on, forever.
But some, God may breathe life into.
God may bring bone to bone and sinew to sinew.

You may be aware of it; a daily ache.
Or it may be unknown to you,
a hidden mystery.

What part of you is God bringing back to life?
Where is God's breath blowing,
the dry bones moving?

Don't direct the wind.
Don't even worry where it is.
Just prophesy to the dry bones.

Speak hope.
Be open to the miracle.
Let God breathe, and wait.ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Keeping Holy Time

ⁱⁱ Steve Garnaas-Holmes *Unfolding Light* www.unfoldinglight.net