

Wilderness: Ezekiel

Rev. Dr. Leah Grundset Davis
Ravensworth Baptist Church
March 29, 2020
Ezekiel 37

Ezekiel is one of those prophets that we don't spend too much time with, usually. Once in awhile, a few passages pop up in the lectionary and we get to hear from the plumb-line-toting, one side and then the other-sleeping, dry-bones raising prophet named Ezekiel.

He has all kinds of prophecies—it would make for some good reading now so you might want to check them out. If you read his prophecies, especially the one from today without knowing when he's working and to whom he's speaking, it might all sound a little out there and wild. And even when you know when he's working and to whom he's speaking, it will still sound a little wild!

Ezekiel was one of those prophets who emerged when the southern kingdom of Judah was taken into Exile by the Babylonian Empire. The period is known as the Exile or the Babylonian captivity. The southern kingdom of Judah had been mostly destroyed. The nation had a national disaster—the Temple destroyed, the people removed and taken to Babylon, and a people traumatized.

“In this second half of Ezekiel, the people are at rock bottom—they are struggling to find hope.¹ They need someone to come and implant hope, to give them hope.” The group in Exile longed for the familiar. They were away from home and nothing was familiar-- at least for the older folks. The younger people born into Exile knew no difference. But all of them had heard or knew of the Temple. It was the place where God lived. It was the place they met to worship God. And now in Exile, the people were having to gather in new ways. They worked to determine how they could gather that still felt like it connected them to one another and to God. They wanted to solidify their identity and most of the texts we read in the Hebrew Scriptures were compiled during this season.

And that's what's going on when Ezekiel is working in Exile. So he has a vision, where God brings him into a valley, full of bones. Ezekiel and God proceed to have a conversation. God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Ezekiel wisely replies, “O Lord God, you know!” After more conversation God tells Ezekiel that when breath enters them, they will be alive. He mentions sinews and skin later, but breath was what brought the spirits of the bones to life.

Ezekiel prophesies to the hopeless bones and as he did, he heard a rattling, a noise and the bones started coming together. And then the breath came into them and they were alive.

Then, God told Ezekiel, “These bones are the whole house of Israel, These bones say they are dried up, and our hope is lost, we are cut off completely.”

God says then that these bones will live because the spirit is in them, and they will be on their own soil yet again.

¹ First Reading podcast.

The breath, the Spirit of God is something for us consider here. The word that's used "ruah," it is the same breath or spirit, that breathed life into the dirt we know as Adam and Eve. It's the same breath or spirit that hovered over the waters at creation. The same spirit that landed on Jesus during his baptism and sent him into the wilderness. It's the same spirit that came upon those first disciples at Pentecost all those centuries later.

It is the spirit of creation, the spirit of ours souls, that connects us to our Creator. And that spirit is dwelling within each of us, reminding us that we are held, and known, and not alone.

God knew the people in Exile felt dry, and hopeless, and cut off. And God promises that those dry bones would rise again, full of Spirit, and hope, and togetherness.

Remember last week when the lectionary-appointed Psalm 23 felt like a balm to our souls? In some ways, Ezekiel's passage describes the feelings of isolation, longing, and grief in the season in which we find ourselves. I couldn't help, but feel the same way about Ezekiel this week. Ezekiel's was a story of a country, but also of a particular people who were feeling helpless.

A colleague wrote this week, "To live in this world, we are practicing sitting with fears and unknowns. We are practicing collective grief. We are confronting how precious and precarious our entangled, interconnected, collective life really is. We are learning new ways of being together, and acknowledging what is lost when we cannot gather together in the flesh, cannot hold or hug one another, cannot see and simply share space and presence with family and friends."²

We are living with all of that. And we are also living in community, with a God right alongside us that says even in the valley of the driest bones, when we prophesy to one another—that hope will make us rise, and God's Spirit will give us life.

This is what we can believe these days:

That the God who makes dry bones rise and whose Spirit hovered over the waters at creation--That God is with us.

That there is hope.

And that we are together.

Amen.

² Rev. Anna Blaedal, *enfleshed* newsletter. March 26, 2020.