

“In Pieces”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, March 29, 2020

Ezekiel 37 – Covid-19 Sermon

There has been a shift in the world. And it hasn't only impacted an entire civilization now sequestered in their homes. There has been a shift in nature. I've watched videos of dolphins swimming in crystal clear canals in Venice. People in China being able to see the stars over their heads, where before they could only see smog. It's as if the planet's ecosystem is getting a rest, a reprieve from the normal relentless assault of human activity. Skies and waters are clearing. There is a new found silence in our streets.

There is also an inner shift happening. In the people who inhabit this planet. An awareness of what is important – health, family, learning to think of others and so keeping indoors to flatten the curve of the pandemic. A groundswell of thankfulness and recognition of those who are 'essential', providing services so that we can continue to function, with shelter, and food. And if we're sick, health care professionals who are sacrificing so much to keep us from dying.

But we struggle with this new shift. We're used to the hustle and bustle, the movement, the noise and distraction. We're *not* used to this lack of busyness, this solitude, or for some of us, this having to run a 'school' in our homes and be the teacher to our own children. And this separateness, sometimes in our own households as we self-isolate from our loved ones. This moving of what had *been* the center to the sidelines. And this new center is filled with disorientation.

Every where we look we see scarcity – empty roads, parks, playgrounds, offices, churches. Grocery shelves are empty. We look out onto this changing landscape in our world and we see emptiness and scarcity. It's becoming our valley of dry bones. And the silence of that valley echoes the silence we're finding in our world. It's uncomfortable. It's hard to live with. We want our normalcy back. Will we get back to what was?

Ezekiel stood in the valley of the very dry bones. I am fixated by the bones. It is the bleakness of the scene that holds me. It's hard to get past the image of the bones, piles and piles of them. In disarray. In pieces.

But it's not about the bones. It's about the breath, the Ruah, the wind, the Spirit. While the bones captivate my imagination, the words of Ezekiel actually interlace the whole passage with the breath of God. It's all about the breath of God. Verse 5 – I will cause breath to enter you. Vs. 8 – but there was no breath in them. Vs. 9 Prophecy to the breath, say to the breath; come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these. Vs 10. And the breath came into them. Vs. 14 I will put my spirit within you.

I will put my spirit within you. Reminds me of Jesus, as he stood in the temple and picked up the scroll of Isaiah and began to read, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” The Bible

is grounded in this Spirit. In Genesis, the Spirit hovered over the waters. And it was the breath of God that breathed into the nostrils of Adam bringing life to him who had been created out of the dust. And the Spirit blew into that Upper Room and swept into the lives of the disciples gathered there, and changed the course of their lives and ours forever. And the same Spirit is here now, binding our hearts into one, as we worship together in heart and mind and spirit.

It's not *about* the bones. It's about the breath. As a poet wrote, "It was never about the bones anyway/rather a glimpse of pure power/a reminder of who's in charge of restoration/real hope lies in the Source."<sup>1</sup>

Even though our center finds itself struggling with disorientation, God's spirit is leading us to a place of reorientation. Some theologians talk about this passage as a promise of God to bring the exiled people of Israel back home to Jerusalem, back home to what they knew, back home to the way they were. But I wonder if we will go back home. Will we go back to the same way, the same routines that we had before, or will we be changed by this deep dive into a changed global reality... where borders and walls make no difference to where the Covid-19 virus spreads. Where skin colour and economic status makes no difference where the Covid-19 virus spreads. Where it becomes obvious where actions are fueled by greed or by compassion. Where so many do not heed the warnings of others to self-isolate and have spread the virus, or worse, died from it.

Ezekiel looked at the valley of the dry bones. God's hand was still on his shoulder, the hand that brought him to that desolate valley. And that hand of God is on your shoulder. Feel the strength it gives. Feel the calm it gives. Feel the reassurance it gives. Now breathe in that strength. Breathe in that calm. Breathe in that reassurance.

There is nothing in Ezekiel's passage that says where the restored people are headed – there is no mention of the fabled land of milk and honey. We are not promised a land of milk and honey either. It will be months before we're out of this new normal.

But we have that hand of God on our shoulder.

And we have that Spirit of the Lord that binds us together,

no matter where we worship from,

gathering our hearts and minds and spirits as one,

connecting us as family, in love and in spirit.

And that is a new normal that we can celebrate!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Dempsey R. Calhoun (Unpublished), *Bone*, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 2, Pastoral Perspective, 124.