Springfield Presbyterian Church

March 26th, 2023

Can These Bones Live?

1. Introduction

As we read the Word this morning, it feels like these two

passages fit the energy of Lent so well. You see, this Lent, we are walking this road and while we know that Easter will come, we are not there yet – we, alike the characters in our Scripture, are wondering – can these bones live? Can hope still exist? Maybe these 40 days feel like way more than 40 days at this point.

 We have to walk this road, and while the world is not a binary place, there is some sense and some truth in this idea that it is only through sadness that we know joy. For Easter to mean all it means that holy and glorious morning, we need to live in this tough space. So, hold on tight as we dig into the Word and know that we will get through this valley of bones.

1. Valley of Dry Bones

I love this text from Ezekiel, strangely, because it provides such a

visceral visual image. Can you see it? The picture is painted – dry bones as far as the eye can see, a valley filled with death, except for the prophet who seems to be right in the middle of the landscape. I wonder what Ezekiel thinks when God says that these dry bones will come back to life. Yes, Ezekiel is faithful, he does indeed prophecy, but as he looks around the valley, as a human himself, the logic of it may rattle his bones. How can this be? Ezekiel’s faith must have been great, but I wonder if his legs quaked a bit when he spoke the Word and the multitude of people arose from the dead. Right before his eyes, hope came alive.

1. Suicide

The visual is so radical, but as I was reading it this week,

something very tangible came to mind as I thought about how this text meets us here and today. I’m going to offer a content warning – for a minute, I’m going to talk about suicide. If you need to think about something else, I respect that, and I’ll call you back into the space. But if you want to hang in with me, I wonder if the Word will also shape you as it has shaped me today.

 I have met with people who have lived in a valley of bones. They are in the valley – they can’t see the horizon, they cannot see over hilltops – all they see is right before them. What they see is pain, heartache, and no signs of life. They are tired – they don’t have the energy to walk the path and to get out of the valley. They don’t want to be here, but this is where they are, and in this moment, they want to join the landscape – they want to join the valley of bones.

 But it isn’t that simple, is it? They don’t want to die, they don’t want this to be their reality, but they cannot see a way out. And I’ve heard their stories – I get why it feels so dire. Yet we, as people who bear the truth that God can awaken a whole valley full of bones – we, as people of faith, know that a little bit of hope can go a long way. We can sit with people, unabashedly unafraid, and through the Spirit, be people of hope – not a hope of platitudes – but a hope that sits with people and holds onto hope when they cannot see it themselves.

 And as I’m speaking this aloud, I can feel it within my spirit – right, this is stigmatized, this is not something we’re supposed to talk about, or this will bring the whole room down. But that’s why I bring it here to begin with – we know that folks are suffering and we, as people of faith, need tools and resources, just like this vision of Ezekiel, to be able to articulate the ways that the Word can enter even the most delicate parts of the human heart. If we become unafraid to have these conversations, we can start to do some powerful, Spirit-led work, where hope intercedes in ways that we can’t even begin to articulate with human words.

1. Lazarus

Yes, those words are hard to hear and speak, but Lent

and this seeking of hope in unexpected places opens the door to fresh understandings of our faith alive in the world. Okay, let me call you back into this space.

 In our second Scripture text, we enter a scene many centuries away from Ezekiel, but similar overlaps in the hope category. As we read, we hear these two sisters, Mary and Martha, who are aching for Jesus to come and save their brother. Jesus knows this brother, Lazarus; they are friends. It seems odd that Jesus hesitates to visit, but instead waits a few days until he meets the sisters at their house.

 I can almost hear Mary and Martha, who both love Jesus but also must feel a little sting that he didn’t come right away. You hear it in Martha’s voice, “If you were here, this wouldn’t have happened…but also, I know that you are God” They are bereaved, their spirits downtrodden, their hearts are broken, because the one they love is now in a tomb. Jesus is deeply moved and their tears move him to tears. When he is at the tomb with the sisters, and now larger community, he makes a statement: “Take away the stone.”

 The sisters, must have looked at one another perplexed. They know that their brother will eventually rise from the dead, but open the grave? Frankly, it reeks in there – let our brother be at peace. Jesus continues though, assuring them, and calls Lazarus out and there before them – their brother stands. Those who didn’t believe before, they just saw death come back to life – and now they believe in Jesus. Just like the valley of the bones, death comes back to life – a foreshadowing of the resurrection to come.

V. Glimmers of Hope

 I think about these sisters, alike Ezekiel, and I marvel at their ability to both stand in human hurt and pain while also living in the hope that their faith sustains. I ask myself again – I ask you – do we have this kind of faith? If you don’t, you don’t need to go over in the corner and feel badly or less worthy. It isn’t a guilt trip. Instead, these stories are ones, particularly in this Lenten season, where we are invited to dare to hope. When everything in this world tells us that hope is gone, the world is going to shambles – point to the Word. When you may have that dark night of the soul kind of night where you wonder – can I find new life and new joy? Remember that God raised up the nation of Israel from thousands of dry bones. When you feel like you are alone in spaces of grief or bereavement, remember that Jesus himself was moved to tears at the tomb of his friend. It’s cheesy, but it is true – God works in the hope business and if we claim that the impossible can become possible, hope needs to live in us too.

 There is hope. It might be a glimmer, it might feel so small – but hope is there. In this season of waiting and watching and walking the road to the cross, maybe you need someone to hold some hope for you – I pray that you have the courage to ask someone to hold hope until you can see the horizon again. In the same sentence, I hope that if you are given that holy invitation, that you hold hope for someone else.

 What does it mean to hold hope? It is simple and complex, all in the same breath – but it doesn’t mean offering platitudes where you say, “God did this for a reason” or “Just keep your chin up.” No, hope is sitting with people, hearing their stories, listening to the Spirit to see where *and if* God is calling you to share, and simply waiting out the hard things of this life. But hope is also knowing that hope is to come and a new day will indeed dawn. Amen.