

Palisades Presbyterian Church
March 9, 2008

Barbara, on a Stony Point Afternoon
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My first seminary retreat was in 2001 or so. It took place at Stony Point Conference Center. As Times Square is the center of the world, it seems that Stony Point is the center of the Presbyterian world for me. It has been a place of “intersections” on my path. A sacred place in many ways, like all of God’s creation, for which I am very grateful.

It was there that I first heard the sermon on “Ezekiel and the Bones” preached by one of my professors, The Rev. Dr. Barbara Austin Lucas. A full foot shorter than I, her witness and fire was, well, contagious. When she got going, she didn’t stir you – she ignited you! And she did it this day, especially for those of us “newbies,” who had never heard the highly energized, “Praise God!” Baptist way of rising a congregation to its feet and the aisles.

She was something!

And this day, she was in rare form! Those bones – didn’t have a chance!

I don’t really remember all of what she said, but I remember how she said it – and that – along with the spirit that it touched in me was wildly powerful. There was nothing calm, or ordered, or genteel about it:

God called Ezekiel and God is calling you! Or you wouldn’t be here. God called Ezekiel to preach to the bones. Why did God call Ezekiel? Why didn’t God do it, Godself? Because God wanted Ezekeiel to preach, and God wants you to preach.

“Mortal, can these bones live?”

Tepid mortal, tepid answer, “O God, well you know.” As if not to make a mistake, mortals turn the question back on God –without committing to what might be a wrong answer!

(Mortal made the mistake of thinking it was a political debate! Be asked a question and give the same answer to everything!)

“Prophecy to these bones and say to them O dry bones, hear the word of God!”

Well, by the time her sermon was over I felt like I needed to run a mile!

Historically, the vision of the dry bones in the valley was likely real. Ezekiel prophesied at about the time that Israel would have been devastated and taken into captivity by the Babylonians. It is likely that seeing these bones – then, or later, perhaps – stirred in him the spirit that produced this incredible intersection in the writings of the Old Testament and the way that God interjected – forced Godself in the unfolding journey of the Hebrews.

Do you believe, mortal? Prophecy!

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.

Think of it! I remember getting punched in the stomach, as a kid. Having the wind knocked out of me. Double-over, wondering how to catch my breath. How to come back; pain, eyes tearing, head pounding, trying to stand...

I'm sure Barbara said something like,

Are you doubled-over? Are you living without the breath of God, the Spirit of God, the power of God in your life? Do you walk around just catching you breath? Or have you got it? Have you found God's breath and life in you? Are you alive with God? What will you do with God now that you have this voice?

Prophecy! Prophecy like the four winds of the heavens! Prophecy so that those doubled-over, defeated, lost, grieving, in sorrow, pain – prophecy so that they may LIVE!

AND – don't expect to be comforted, secure, without doubt, unsure of yourself – Just believe even in the midst of it all. Believe, even when you don't feel like believing. Even when the best you can do is turn a question you hear inside from God into an answer you think God might like.

Geez, I know about this stuff. For the longest time, I kept thinking that I needed to be perfect before I could be pleasing to God. I was brought up to see myself as a sinner, running to confession to absolve my sins, just in case it was time to die – I wanted to make sure I was on that staircase to heaven.

It was so oppressive, eventually to me, that I pulled away. I knew something was happening when I would go to confession and upon getting the penance from the priest – the prayers you would say for the sins you committed based on the severity of their nature – I knew something was awry, at least for me, when I would leave a confessional with several rosaries to say (300-400 prayers in all),

realize I didn't have the time; scoot over to another confessional when no one was looking; tell the same prayers to a different priest; and leave with three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers!

Nobody told me about the voice inside of me that spoke as the voice did to the prophet Ezekiel, the voice that said these people will live – preach to them. Be with them, do not see in them the loss or the devastation they see in themselves. Do not see in them the despair they see in themselves. Do not see in them the absence of God – that they see as the cause for their trouble –

For I am not absent mortal! Find me in you – so they can find me:

“And they shall know then that I am God, when I open their graves, and bring them up from their graves, MY PEOPLE; I will put my spirit in them through you and they shall live; they shall find their soil – their place – and they shall know that I am God – and they are not forgotten.”

You've heard me say before that I the ancients – and even many into this post-modern world, see events as punishment for sin: Disobey God and your nation will be destroyed.

You've also heard me say that I don't believe in a God of alternating wrath and love; more powerful intensified version of what we know as part of human nature.

I believe in a God that beckons us closer to a higher nature, a state of being, that addressed sin not as acts to be punished – but in the Hebrew definition of the word: as distance from God – from the God spirit in me, in you, in those who appear to be dried out bones!

The meaning of bones in the ancient times was quite different than the meaning we ascribe today. The soul was in all parts of the body, especially the bones upon which the body was draped! To tell the bones to breathe was to say to the soul to breathe. Come alive!

Come closer to God. See God in yourself and in others and in the world and in those with whom we agree, disagree, dislike, abhor, embrace –

God is in the bones: not these bones or those bones – all the bones.

God might as well have been saying to Ezekiel – Don't you get it?! Don't be like them, life! You've hear of “Get. Milk? Well Get God! Get Life! I am with all of you, even when the best you can to solve your problems is to kill each other on my glorious meadows -- or whether you are putting up barriers to whom it is you let into your houses of worship: which is even worse than the wars you wage – for it is a war against those seeking me! How could you think either of these or the other things you do are right?

Ever hear that voice?

I don't know what actually happened to Ezekiel on that day that made him see that vision. Maybe he met Barbara.

Or maybe like you and me, he saw something in his heart and he knew that at its core God was the answer – however he knew God. He saw beyond what the eyes see into the dimension of the bones, the dimension of D.H. Lawrence on the cover of the bulletin. The place where things are known – deep in our bones.

And once you know like that – you know what it is you are supposed to do.

Be still and know that I am God – and you will know how it is **you** are supposed to be **you** so that God can be glorified: reflected – in you, and others, and all creation. Glory: from the Hebrew word that means brightness, splendor, magnificence, majesty. This is the life that is in you now.

That means many things, but it means at its heart – no war – figure out another way; no killing – find out how; no turning anyone away; no houses of worship as exclusive clubs; no segregation by race, color, creed, sexual orientation; no judgment of others; and no walking around feeling as though your life is the expectation of punishment.

It means knowing that in times of distress, sorrow, loneliness, longing – that we are full of a God who knows such things, as well.

I don't know how God laughs or cries, expresses joy or dismay; but I know God knows such things. I know they are not delivered with revenge or violence, deception or disenfranchisement. I know that because deeply inside of me and in the God of you and all I meet – that always comes through.

This reading and the John reading this morning can be interpreted, studied, revealed to us in many ways – just like God.

Jesus's raising of Lazarus, as described by John, was written to convey some meaning to the then followers of Jesus. The meaning for us today is a little harder to come by. Who hasn't lost a loved one and wished, prayed, begged God to bring them back to life, just as Mary and Martha did. Why Lazarus, not our loved ones. Because Lazarus was a friend of Jesus? Well, aren't we all friends of Jesus? This appears to have been a very good day for Lazarus, but what of us?

For me, this is a story about the tomb. About coming out from the place from which God calls us, to see the world anew, through the new eyes of our own resurrection of the possibility and presence of God in our lives – however you may know God.

And then, from that deep and quiet place of the tomb, from the sometimes stench of what must be left behind, to come to one another and this world with God in a new way.

On that day and every day we do such, the valley of the bones is rattled as another leaves its grip, the mourning for definitive loss becomes a passage in this kairos, this time of God, rather than a destination in which to wither.

Let it be in the way we look at our children, one another, our leaders in all places, and in the image we see in the mirror each day.

We are blessed – we are breathed upon and loved by God from deep within.

Now, we just need to believe. May you encounter the Barbara, the Ezekiel, the Jesus, or warble of the robin, or the velvet of a night sky that makes it so.