

March 9, 2008 - Lent 5

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the Divine came upon me, and God brought me out by the Spirit and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O God, you know." ⁴Then God said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of God. ⁵Thus says GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am God." 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. ⁹Then God said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹Then God said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole People. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our

hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land.¹³ And you shall know that I am God, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, God, have spoken and will act.”

Let us pray.....

What a joy it is to be back here with you after two weeks in Venezuela. I’m only sorry that I was not able to be here to hear Elaine and Bill preach the last two Sundays. It is a blessing to be a part of this community where the conversation on our journey of faith is so rich and in which so many voices contribute through our liturgists and preachers. I also want to lift up in prayer Polly Ulrich and her family. Polly was to be the liturgist this morning but her father died this week and their family has gathered in Milwaukee for the memorial service. Thank you David, for filling in on such short notice.

Well, what a powerful story from the Hebrew Scripture this morning!

Most scholars agree that this is the oldest metaphor of resurrection in the Biblical tradition. Ezekiel uses it not to depict an afterlife or a general resurrection of the dead, but as a metaphor for the renewal of a people. Ezekiel is in the midst of a people who have experienced utter defeat and destruction. Their cultural centers have been destroyed, their land occupied and their leaders killed or sent into exile. All their hopes and dreams have been destroyed. There is no future or hope.

This resurrection story evokes powerful emotions within me every time I read it. I always hear it read in Paco's voice.

In 1989 I was in Morazan, El Salvador. I had been apart of the international accompaniment of the return of the refugees from the UN refugee camp in Colomancagua, Honduras. After the initial days of building a new town from scratch for 5,000 people – some of the hardest and most intense physical work I have ever done – I went with the pastoral team to a near by village to be apart of a retreat to evaluate how the pastor work in the new community was going and how it was being integrated with rest of the pastoral work in the zone.

The following day there were four of us in the truck heading back to new town. Rogelio Poncel was driving, I was in the front seat and Paco Calles and

Rufina Amaya were the be back seat. Rogelio Poncell was the Roman Catholic priest who served entire northern half of the department of Morazan which was under guerrilla control and who the Salvadoran Army had issued a shot to kill order for. Paco Calles had been Arch Bishop Romero's personal secretary and was working with me at the Pastoral Center in San Salvador. Rufina Amaya was a Cataquist who worked with the children. She had returned with the refugees from Colomancagua.

As we approached a fork in the road, Rufina said to Rogelio, "It is time for me to go visit it my children." Rogelio stopped the car and did not say anything in response. We sat there in silence for quite some time before Rogelio said, "Are you sure?" Rufina answered quietly but firmly, "Yes."

We were at the turn off for El Mozote were the Salvadoran Army had committed one of the worst massacures in Salvadoran history. Between 1200 and 2000 people, mostly women and children, were slaughtered. Among them were Rufina's four children. Rufina was the sole survivor.

We took the turn off and headed towards El Mozote. The dirt road had not be maintained for at least 8 years and we needed the four wheel drive in a number of places. It is only about 8 kilometers but it took about an hour.

We came to a stop in what had been the plaza in the center of the village. It was still morning but the sun was hot and we got out of the truck and stood in the shade of an old quanocaste tree. The ruins of the adobe church were on one side. The other adobe buildings had collapsed from the rains after the army had burned them. Some of the walls of the buildings that had been constructed out of cement block still stood and they were full of bullet holes.

Rufina took Rogelio by the hand and she led us through her crucible. It was the Way of the Cross. At several places along the way the four of us embraced and wept. It culminated at the ruins of the church. Among the charred ruins the only object that was intact was the stone baptismal font that was sculpted from a single piece of the local volcanic stone. It was here that the bones of Rufina's four children lay with those of over 400 other children whose bodies were burned in the church.

In the midst of the ruins and the bones, around the baptismal font we prayed. Paco opened his Bible and read, "Dios puso sobre mi su mano, y su Espiritu me llevo, dejandome en una llanura llena de huesos."..."The hand of the Divine came upon me, and God brought me out by the Spirit and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?"..... And the words of

the Prophet Ezekiel cried out, not as some spiritual metaphor promising bodily resurrection for the faithful of a comfortable North American congregation but as an existential reality – the lived reality of the Salvadoran people.

Rufina was the one who responded to Ezekiel's words with a proclamation the Good News. "Yes! These bones live! We have returned from exile and we will build a new El Salvador where there is justice and peace."

Rufina died this past year in the new community that she helped build. She remarried and had three more children. She coordinated the community day care center up until last year. She is now buried at the monument that was erected in El Mozote over the sight where all the bones of the victims of the massacre were given a formal burial.

It has been 18 years since Rufina claimed Ezekiel's prophecy and proclaimed the Good News in El Mozote. During those 18 years the imperial project with its Free Trade Pacts, IMF structural adjustments, World Bank loans with eternal debt and military aid has continued the crucifixion of Latin America.

But sisters and Brothers, I am here to testify that a new breeze is blowing in Latin America. The four winds are blowing the Spirit of God through out the land. For the first time since the European Invasion a new Latin America is emerging that is putting the

abundance of God's creation to the service of the poor majorities. And Venezuela is the catalyst.

It is not perfect. But it has created the space for the most hopeful experiments to emerge in the Americas in our lifetime. Brazil, Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, Chile, Nicaragua, Cuba, Uruguay. A new wind is blowing – filled with hope and possibilities.

Even in Rufina's beloved El Salvador it appears that the FMLN is going to win control of the national government in the elections this year.

In Venezuela UNESCO has declared that illiteracy has been eliminated! Hundreds of thousands of adults are completing the high school education and going on to university.

Health Care is a human right and for the first time all Venezuelans have access to quality health care. Over 24,000 new medical students are being trained. In five years Venezuela will have more doctors per capita than any other country in the Americas except Cuba. For the first time in a century Venezuela is working towards food self-sufficiency and sustainability.

The Venezuelan people are the protagonists of their own historical project. They are clear that their experiment is one of participatory democracy.

Sisters and Brothers, I stand here as a living witness to the resurrection of hope in the peoples of Latin America.

But Sisters and Brothers the US government wants to destroy the breath that is blowing through out Latin America knitting together the dry bones of 500 years of exploitation and death. The Bush regimen calls the Spirit that is breathing life into the people of Latin America who have been crucified by the massive poverty caused by the US trade policies, evil.

The model of democracy that the US government proudly proclaims that it wants to "share" with the rest of Latin America is that of the one remaining country in South America that is a compliant puppet of the US - the model of so called "Democratic Security" of the Uribe regimen in Colombia. . This wonderful model that has the worst human rights record in all of Latin America, where death squads and paramilitaries set up by the State have killed more trade unionists, journalists, teachers, elected public officials and peasant leaders, than in any other Latin American country. Each of the past six years that I have accompanied the Christian Peacemaker teams in Colombia, someone I know has been killed by the paramilitaries or State security forces.

We have worked hard these past six years to change US policy towards Colombia. Last year we won the first significant reduction in US military aid to Colombia. . Even as we gather here in worship this morning over 1000 representatives of churches across the USA are gathered in Washington DC for ecumenical advocacy days and they will continue to

push for a fundamental change in US policy towards Colombia and Latin America.

Much depends on us, the citizens of the USA, and how we vote in November. If our Senator from Illinois wins the nomination for President and is able to swept into office on a wave of popularity that brings with it a significant increase in progressive legislators, then it is possible that the Spirit of life and hope will continue to blow with less obstructions throughout the hemisphere.

But, the forces of wealth and power will not quietly let this happen. This past week we saw the US and its puppet in Colombia try to provoke a regional war in South America. Fortunately, all the leaders of South America condemned the invasion of Equator by Colombia and were able to negotiate a peaceful resolution. BUT, we still have eight months before our election and we will need a new war or incident to convince the people of the US that we need to continue in a perpetual state of war to protect the homeland. And to do so we will need a military man as our commander and chief.

The Spirit of God is blowing through the Americas. It is breathing life and hope into the poor. Will we welcome this wind from the four directions as a blessing or will be resist it and experience it as a terrible and threatening storm?

Only if we welcome this wind as God's gracious gift will we be able to receive God's promise to the people and be restored to right relationship with our sisters and brothers, with the land, and with our God.

But what ever we do we "shall know that God has spoken and will act."

Amen.

Ezekiel was a prophet of the 6th century BCE, at the time of the Babylonian exile of the Judean leadership

When Ezekiel delivers his prophecy concerning the 'dry bones', he is pictured standing either on a plain or in a valley (the Hebrew *biq'ah* means a broad plain with shallow walls). In any case, the place is filled with dried-out, sun-bleached bones – very dead. The symbolism is of an Israel whose hope has died, and which appears to be in a situation where there is no future. In that sense this vision appears to belong to the period of the Exile, in time before the hopeful message of chapter 36, where images of renewal and restoration are paramount.

The dry bones themselves are portrayed as 'dead as dead' could possibly be. As Ezekiel looks at them, he sees no possibility of a return to life. Even so, he is not willing to deny that God can restore them.

When asked whether they can come back to life, he merely acknowledges that God knows the answer. Then he receives his instructions. He must prophesy to the dry bones, which are clearly symbolic of the defeated people of Israel. He must tell the dry bones that God will enter them with the breath of life, and cause them to become strong and whole again. On delivering these words of hope from God, he watches the dry bones/Israel come back to life. They are then identified specifically as 'the whole house of Israel', meaning those still under occupation in the homeland as well as those in exile. Yet, although they have life restored to them, they are still not hopeful for their future. Their circumstances remain the same; they are still in exile.

The next section (vv. 11-13) contains a 'resurrection motif' – the opening of graves. This is not meant as actual resurrection from the dead, but refers to the 'resurrection' or 'restoration' of the people as the 'house of Israel' in their own land. The people's hope that these things will happen lies in God's word through the prophet. They will know it is true when it actually takes place. Verse 14 clearly states that the source of the life that is bringing Israel back from the dead is the 'spirit' of the Lord. When all life appears to have gone, the word of God is the means whereby God's spirit revives and restores.

The Ezekiel story is symbolic of the way God can restore a disheartened and oppressed people from hopelessness (from the 'grave') to a new and better existence.

Resurrection is not simply concerned with the 'after life' but with the raising of broken spirits, of bodies as good as dead, of hearts that lack strength and courage, of communities that are fractured, of relationships that have waned or become fractious, a peoples who have no hope etc. While Ezekiel's vision may not have direct connection to resurrection in the way we might normally see it, it does remind us that the resurrection that is in Jesus Christ and the risen life in him reaches to this side of the grave too giving new life and hope where there has been only 'dry bones' in the past.

The role of the *Spirit of God* (ruah - breath, wind, spirit) demonstrates God's role in bringing the vision to Ezekiel, and in bringing life to the people as God did in Gen 2 by breathing into the nostrils of humanity to give them life

Ezekiel then performs two prophetic actions. His first prophetic act restores the flesh and muscle as promised, but there is no breath (Hebrew, *ruach*) in them. God commands Ezekiel to now prophesy to the breath and command it to enter the bones so that they may live. The breath obeys; the bones live and stand together as a “vast multitude” (10). This dual prophetic action in some ways mirrors God’s own actions in the creation story: God forms a man from the dust of the ground, and then breathes into it the breath of life (Genesis 2:7).

IN MY 58 years I have never known the gospel to be more relevant, exciting and urgently needed. And I have never known the churches and their clergy to have lower morale. Declining numbers, financial shortfalls, sexual abuse by clergy, the closing of churches, a growing sense of captivity to the regnant culture--Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones could be describing us, not Israel in Babylonian captivity.

This is, so far as I can tell, the first instance of the metaphor of resurrection in history. Ezekiel uses it not to depict an afterlife or a general resurrection of the dead, but as a metaphor for the renewal of the people Israel. Captivity had sapped their hope. They regarded their political and military defeat as an irrevocable historical judgment. Nothing would dislodge the Babylonian colossus from its hegemony over their world. Yahweh had been proven impotent. Marduk had prevailed. Why not assimilate? The ancient faith had proved inadequate; it was nothing but the tribal faith of a tiny population on the fringe of a great empire. Now the exiles were bereft of their land, their temple, their sacrifices--everything that made them a people with a unique identity and vocation. They were removed to the heart of empire. Here were gods of real power, gods of universal sovereignty, gods of irresistible might.

There was no end in sight for the empire, no conceivable vindication of Yahweh, no grounds for hope. The people lament, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." When Yahweh addresses the prophet, "Mortal, can these bones live?," Ezekiel can scarcely answer yes. The only reasonable response is no. In a case like this his evasion is an act of superhuman optimism: "O Lord God, you know."

Yet Yahweh orders Ezekiel to prophesy to these dry bones--spiritually desiccated Israel--and to call them back to life. And though this miracle is one that only Yahweh can perform, it is the prophet who must, at each step of the way, speak to the dry bones. It is the prophetic task, in a time of unraveling hopes, to declare the unimaginable, to assert the rationality of the unthinkable, to call the people to new hope, grounded not on the past but on sheer faith that God is about to do the impossible.

It literally was impossible. No people could be expected to survive the Babylonian experience without assimilation. Yet God did literally resurrect this people and bring them back into their land. And God did it through nothing but vision. God

promises, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."

Nor does the prophet's task end there. Many of the exiles had been born in Babylon. They had never seen the Holy Land or the temple. In order to give concreteness to the vision of the return, Ezekiel is given the dimensions of the future temple. Chapters 40 through 48 constitute a veritable blueprint for the temple's rebuilding.

With this prophecy a wonderful thing happened. People began debating the details. Some even disagreed with Ezekiel, suggesting alternatives. So involved was everyone in the specifications that they failed to notice the critical thing: they had all accepted as an established fact that it was going to happen. Vision had become expectation. Hope had become anticipation. The unimaginable had been imagined, and by that sovereign creative act it had entered into the course of history.

That is how history is made: by envisioning of new alternative possibilities and acting on them as if they were inevitable. That is how despair is overcome: by the declaration of unlikelihoods welling up from the center of reality, by prophesying a course of action God is conspiring to bring to pass.

Israel did go home. The temple was rebuilt. Babylon, that eternal empire, fell within 50 years. And more: God's promise to put divine spirit in them, though not immediately fulfilled, was reiterated by Joel in an even more unbelievable vision: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit."

This unprecedented egalitarian dream was to wait 400 years before it received its first installment of fulfillment at Pentecost. Again, a group of people who had lost their moorings, who were uncertain of the way forward, lacking in all models and patterns and sure of only one thing: the resurrection that was mere metaphor in Ezekiel--a metaphor powerful enough to reconstitute a nation--had happened in their midst. Once again God was doing the impossible. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit was power and promise for their journey into the unknown.

God is at work in our malaise today. It may be that the parish-based church will continue to wither away even as people experience unprecedented levels of spiritual hunger and restlessness. It may be that the denominational way of doing things will continue to decline and will bring about a diminution of the fragmentation of Christianity. It may be that the new forms of the church's faithfulness are already present among us, unrecognized. It may be that they are still waiting to be birthed. This will be one of the most turbulent and innovative

periods in the church's entire history. The very depression that wracks so many may be the pry bar that will separate them from dying forms. In any case, God is already bringing these dry bones to life.

In 1980's one of the Public Sanctuaries for refugees fleeing the US funded and directed war against the poor of Central America that I helped organize was in Concordia, Kansas. It was a the mother house of a Roman Catholic Religious Community of Women. They welcomed an extended Mayan family from Guatemala whose ancestral village in the Ixil triangle had been illuminated from the face of the earth by the Guatemalan military. We reunited 26 survivors from four generations of the extended family at the Convent in Concordia. Within 3 months the first child of the fifth generation was born and then before the end of the first year, the matriarch of the family, "la abuelita" died. Her death was a trememdous crisis for the family. She was the first member of this extented family whose bones would not lie in the soil of their ancestral village. For as long as anyone could remember they had been connected with their land. Their sacred text, the Popolvu, told the story of their ancesters arriving in Quiche long before the European Invassion. What were they to do with the bones of their grandmother? Would her spirit wonder for ever, looking to be reunited with her ancesters and her land, which were one and the same?