5 Lent March 29, 2020

“Mortal, can these bones live?

+

To the despairing exiles, forced to live in the foreign land of their conquerors, Ezekiel has a message of hope: “These dead bones **will** LIVE!” Psalm 137 is a their lament, as they remember Zion, the hill of Jerusalem on which the city of David was built.

Listen to these ancient words:

By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered you, O Zion. As for our harps, we hung them up on the trees in the midst of that land. For those who led us away captive asked us for a song, and our oppressors called for mirth: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”

How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?

The exiles had reason to fear they would cease to exist as the people of Yahweh. Ezekiel gives them hope by describing a valley of bones representing the nation of Israel. Not only will flesh, and sinews be given to the bones, the breath of life will be breathed into them.

There is a clear parallel to our own situation, exiles in our homes. We also ask, “What will the future bring?” We are trying to cope, as those ancient Israelite must have done. Unlike those exiles, we are not suffering from the armies of a foreign power; instead, in a strange way, we are united with peoples throughout the world. Our enemy is vague, a virus, and everyone is connected in joint vulnerability. Will our compassion extend beyond family and tribe, to embrace all of God’s creation? Will we find meaning in our present suffering? The following brief essay has an important message for us:

“When we carry our own suffering in solidarity with humanity’s one universal longing for deep union, it helps keep us from self-pity or self-preoccupation. We know that we are all in this together. It is just as hard for everybody else, and our healing is bound up in each other’s. Almost all people are carrying a great and secret hurt, even when they don’t know it. This realization softens the space around our overly-defended hearts. It makes it hard to be cruel to anyone. It somehow makes us one—in a way that easy comfort and entertainment never can.“

The irony of suffering is that it takes us deeper; it will come when it will, and the reasons for it will be many. But when our suffering is shared, it touches our hearts in a way that joy rarely does.

In my recent self-isolation, I’ve felt a strange equality. At the moment, there is no party I haven’t been invited to; no great honor I have been deprived of; no elite establishment I cannot afford: they are all closed. I’ve learned yet again that in ways that count, we are all the same.

We are similar in our shared anxiety. We can turn our anxiety into something productive, like washing our hands, social distancing, taking food to an elderly relative or neighbor, and calling a friend who is alone, and, in my case, streaming an old PBS series, “The Jewel in the Crown.”

Not knowing for certain the trajectory of the current crisis creates an uncertainty similar to grief, and this may keep us from living in the present if we let it fester. If you are safe, and well, give thanks for your present safety. Prepare a special meal and enjoy the anticipation of the dinner to come. Since you are social distancing, feel good that you are doing what you should be doing for your own safety and for the safety of others.

Where is the blessing in the suffering we undergo and the suffering we hear and read about? When we enter into the suffering we may discover the close relationship between ‘individual heartbreak and the broken heartedness of the world.’ Avoiding or repressing the natural emotions we feel cuts us off from the world; if we wrestle with our troubling emotions, as Jacob did with the angel of God, we break out of our isolation and become healers.

A writer I admire wrote this: “The best thing to do when fear has a neck hold on you is to befriend someone who lives in real and constant fear. The best thing to do when sadness has your arms twisted behind your back is to sit down with the saddest child you know and say, “Tell me about it. I have all day.” The hardest part about doing any of these things is to do them without insisting that your new teachers make you feel better by acting more cheerful when you are around. After years of being taught that the way to deal with painful emotions is to get rid of them, it can take a lot of re-schooling to learn to sit with them instead, finding out from those who feel them what they have learned by sleeping in the wilderness. . . . “

Ezekiel prophesied a new heart and a new spirit when the exiles returned to their land. We can hope and pray that when our physical isolation ends, and we return to a kind of normalcy, we will enter more compellingly into healing the wounds of our world.