

Prayer of Preparation: *Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and put a new and right spirit within me. Then our lips will open, and our mouths will declare praise. Amen.*

All of Israel has fallen. All of it. The nation is gone. Israel is bare bones lying in the Judean desert. Not only is Israel bare bones, Israel is **dry** bare bones. There is nothing left.

Hear the message God gave to his servant Ezekiel: *Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.'*

Israel has lost hope. The community, the body, is looking inward and upward and Israel can't find hope. The people whose ancestors crossed the Sea of Reeds and **danced** when they safely reached the other side, have lost hope.

The people who have been fed manna in the wilderness have died.

The people who have seen the promised land are gone.

The people who have seen God work over and over again through Moses, through David, through Job, through thousands of years of God's faithfulness...this Israel, this people, have lost hope. Not one or two people, all of Israel. Ezekiel is written during the Babylonian captivity. The people of Israel are deported to Babylon while a remnant is left on the land. Israel has lost all hope and Ezekiel sees the people through God's eyes: dry bones scattered across barren land.

It doesn't take much for us to see that in some ways we too are dry bones scattered across an empty church. It doesn't take much to see that in some ways we have given up hope. We look around us and see a community who doesn't believe in church. We see that families are home in bed on Sunday mornings because the weekend is for relaxing. We know that in many ways families choose anything, especially sports, over church, Wednesday evening Bible studies, and youth events. We look around, remember how great church life used to be, and we lose hope for our future.

We forget the times and ways that God has blessed us and we speak negativity into our circumstance. **We** become the Israel God shows Ezekiel in the vision.

In the midst of our lamenting about what used to be, we forget that we are where God wants us to be. We are where God called us to be; right here, right now.

I know you're thinking...**me**? God has placed **me here**? God wants me here **now**? So, wait...me being here is not an accident...it's all part of God's plan?

In the midst of all of the "we used to's" and "we were's" and the "I remember when's," we forget that we are where God wants us to be. Even while attendance is declining, God calls us here. Even while we struggle to find new programs and approaches, God calls us here. Even while we compete with what has become the busyness of Sunday instead of the rest of Sabbath, we are where we are meant to be.

God has set us down here the same way God set Adam down in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2. God set us down here and asks this community, "*Can these dry bones live?*"

Can these dry bones live? Can a breath of life be breathed over the bones of who we were to create a who we have become?

I can only imagine that as Ezekiel prophesied over the bones of Israel, as Ezekiel prophesied over a people who had lost all hope, that as the bones of Israel began to come together there was noise. Not the noise

of breaking apart, but the noise of putting together. The moans and groans, not the *we can't*s and *we shouldn't*s and the *I can't believe*s...**this** is the moans and groans of a people who are being knit back together one act of faith at a time.

I can hear the wind that is the Spirit of God rushing back and forth over the bones calling us to remember our faith in God. Reminding us that the time for grief for days past is over...the time of rebuilding is here and now.

Here's the question we must ask ourselves; who can stand? In the midst of the grief for what used to be...who can stand? In the midst of the grief about all we have lost...who can stand? How do we as a congregation stand together and move into the future leaving behind who we used to be for who God is calling us to be here and now?

We as in a congregation? I thought this was about an individual...In our gospel lesson today, Jesus tells those who are gathered around Lazarus' tomb to take the stone away. Jesus doesn't remove the stone. Take a new look at what Jesus does: Jesus calls the community, those people who have gathered, to remove the stone. And once the community removes the stone and Lazarus comes out, Jesus tells them to unbind him. Go. Take off all that stuff that represents finality and death. Release Lazarus so that he may live. Release the church from its binds of the past so that it may live also.

This is the last week of Lent. This is the time when our prayer and fasting help us to see ourselves and our community in a different way. This the time in when we take a look at all the ways in which we cling to what used to be and ask ourselves, can they stand? Should they stand? Or, is it time for something different?

This is the time when we, like those gathered around the tomb, work together and remove the stone which is locking us in darkness and death. This is the time when we work together to remove the bindings of the past. This is the time to stand in the present as we forge a way to the future together. This is the time when we look at ourselves through God's eyes and realize that there is hope.

Our scriptures today are all about rebirth, renewal, and community unbinding itself to all the possibilities of the future.

Response to the Word: *Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and put a new and right spirit within me. Then our lips will open, and our mouths will declare praise. Amen.*