

Sermon: The Great Vigil

The Rev. Mike Wernick

March 31, 2018

Year B

At the Vigil

Genesis 1:1–2:2

Psalm 136:1-9, 23-26

Genesis 22:1–18

Psalm 16

Exodus 14:10–15:1

Exodus 15:1b–13, 17–18

Isaiah 4:2-6

Psalm 122

Ezekiel 37:1–14

Psalm 143

Isaiah 61:1–4, 9–11

Deuteronomy 32:1–4, 7, 36a, 43a

At the Eucharist

Psalm 114

Romans 6:3–11

Mark 16:1–8

Mortal... can these bones live... tonight's reading from Ezekiel... challenged the prophet... and it challenges us... God asks whether these bones can live... in Ezekiel's time... the bones in the valley... were all the people Israel... who felt dead inside... but not only dead... but desiccated... so dry that there was no muscle or sinew or flesh upon them... and maybe... if they had had our medical technology... they might have said they felt so dead... that you couldn't even extract any DNA from their marrow... to know who they'd been... that dead...

The people of Israel had been taken into exile... into Babylon... away from their homes... from the way of life they knew... but especially... mostly... they had been taken away from their Temple... which had been destroyed... and away from their God... who had said that the Temple would remain God's house forever...

They also recounted in Ps. 137... that their despair had been so great... that when their captors asked them to sing one of the songs of Zion... all they could do was hang their lyres on the branches of the poplars... and weep...

Mortal... can these bones live... this vision is held up to us today... when so many of us have our own experiences of dry bones... the dry bones of racism... the dry bones of economic hardship... the dry bones of mass shootings and war and genocide... the dry bones of environmental devastation and global warming and natural disasters... the dry bones of drug wars and gang slayings... the dry bones of all those places lacking food... or water... or clothing... or shelter... or any respect for life...

And our faith... is challenged every day... we wonder whether life really can come out of death... our faith is challenged every day when bad things happen to good people... our faith is challenged every day... when we don't quite know just how to choose life... over death...

But the God who asks the question about *whether these bones can live...* is... as Professor of Word and Worship James Wallace writes... the God who created the world and all that is in it... who brought a[n entire] people to birth from a childless couple in Haran... who freed their descendants from the living death of slavery in Egypt... and entered into covenant with them... who raised up judges and prophets calling them to life again and again... while they continued to choose death... the story of the Valley of Dry Bones... is God's promise to us... that life does indeed... come out of death... Tonight... and most Sundays... at the end of the Gospel reading... Deacon Kim says... *This is God's Story...* and we answer... *This is Our Story...* I pray we don't believe these stories happened only to strangers thousands of years ago... and they have nothing to do with us... I pray we own these stories deeply... that we take them to heart... and that they find expression in our lives... because we are reminded every Sunday... at this Table... that life comes out of death... we are fed with the essence... the Spirit of what it is... that makes dry bones live... and even when we don't own these stories fully... even when we can't... even if we couldn't sing a song of Zion in a foreign land... that doesn't diminish God's promise to us... not one *iota*... not one bit... because God is a God of life... and that doesn't mean just physical life... but emotional life... and

psychological life... and spiritual life... and even when we feel dead inside... we can be born again... through hope...

In a little while... Angela will receive the sacrament of baptism... the sacrament of new life... she will be born again into the body of Christ... she will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven...

But even when we are baptized... even when our theology proclaims loudly and clearly that we are forgiven... even when we confess and are absolved of our sins... even when we ask others to forgive us... and even when they let go of a hurtful thing we've said or done... when it no longer colors *their* relationship with us... it may still color *our* relationship with them... because of what those tapes in our heads say... as they play over and over again... or because of how we feel... because of how we may imagine they still feel... or because of what we may imagine they think... and it can be a hard thing to forgive ourselves... to do the inner work... the inner cleansing... that must be done...

But when you think about it... every one of us has had a kind of baptism at our births... when water breaks and flows... and we pass through it... this natal baptism is a celebration of the fact that God already loves us... and has already forgiven us... and will forgive us over and over again... not if we miss God's mark for us... but when we do... even if we feel abandoned...

Because of the Babylonian Exile... the Israelites felt abandoned by God... and they felt abandoned because the Temple had been destroyed... God had said that God would remain there forever... the despair they felt must have been crushing... but in Ezekiel 10:18... the prophet tells of YHWH leaving the Holy of Holies... and passing across the threshold... and being borne by the cherubim to Babylon... to be with God's people... to comfort them...

In tonight's Gospel... the women went to the tomb to comfort each other and to anoint the body of Jesus... which had also... been destroyed... and instead of his body... they found an angel... who told them that Jesus had gone ahead of them... to Galilee...

Mortal... can these bones live... we may not know how bones come together... or how sinews and skin and flesh come to bones... or how the Spirit breathes the breath of life into us... but the Valley of Dry Bones is God's promise to us... that life does indeed... come out of death... and the God who brings life out of death... brings new life through the water with which we will baptize Angela...

The Gospel ends... *They went out and fled from the memorial... because trembling and frenzy had them... and they said nothing to any one...* perhaps they said nothing... because Roman oppression was unpredictably close... but perhaps they were overwhelmed by the emerging truth... perhaps they were the first disciples who began to realize... that just as God was really not limited by the Temple's stone walls... neither was Jesus limited by the bones or flesh of his body's Temple... and that the Spirit which gives life... permeates all of creation... perhaps they were the first to grasp... on that first Easter... the unfathomable depth of God's forgiveness... and the immeasurable breadth of God's love... and to realize... that not even death can minimize them... or contain them in a tomb...

Happy Easter!

Mike+