

Seeing Life – Rev. Dr. Alan Dorway
Ezekiel 37:1-14
March 29, 2020

I like zombie movies. I've said that before, but with being at home, Vicki started watching *The Walking Dead* with me and we finished all the seasons on Netflix (please note, zombie movies contain blood, gore, violence, and I do not recommend them for anyone under 18).

The reason I enjoy zombie shows is because it's not about the zombies.

Everyone can tell who's a zombie. These are people or shadows of people who walk between life and death. They are reduced from humans to killing them and we all should know by now, to kill a zombie: aim for the head.

Zombies are easy to figure out, it's the human interaction surrounding zombies that's fascinating. Who do you trust? Who is willing to compromise their beliefs or moral to survive? How do we rebuild community? What makes a family or an alliance? Who's in or out in this need to survive? These are just a few of the questions people wrestle in a zombie world.

One of the characters in the *Walking Dead* leads a group of people at a place called the kingdom. He's King Ezekiel. I have enjoyed his character arch.

He's a unique person who has a tiger as a pet, he's charismatic, he's a thespian, and when Carol calls him out, he tells her the truth and reminds her, sometimes you have to fake it to make it. He is not without his faults. Yet, one scene I think defines him is his speech before a fateful battle (again, which group of people to do trust and align with) he comes to his people and reflects, 'today I smile'.

In a world turned upside down, you need people with a radical vision of hope. Our world has been turned upside down and it hit me this past week, I needed to turn off my news feeds because those were not bringing me hope.

I preached a series in February about core facets of the church and my second one was as followers of Jesus, we share hope to each other and our world. Hope is not something we hold on to as ours alone, but we share it with others to support each other in life.

We share hope with our world by trusting in the presence of Jesus to be with us, guide us, and deliver us through all the insecurity and trials we go through as a world.

Yet, within two months of that sermon, we find ourselves in need hope. Hope that this death plaguing us, coronavirus, is not the final word. Hope for those families, individuals, and communities suffering.

Hope for our doctors, nurses, hospital workers who are risking while following their gracious call to care for us. Hope for the daily changing of information, confusion, and stress over making decisions for groups or ourselves on the fly.

Hope connecting even in solitude and our social distancing. Heck for me this week, I needed hope to see beyond politics and to stop judging those who are not taking this pandemic seriously.

And our text from Ezekiel speaks to hope. I think I've only preached on these verses maybe once before, so as this was part of the Sunday lectionary, I was intrigued.

How does a valley of dry bones give us hope or help us to see new life? The imagery of not just some bones, but a full valley of scattered, dry, left there for a long time, life not present, and chaotic dead bones. This hopeless, lifeless, and purposeless valley give life?

First, God grabs Ezekiel. The Message takes what we read in the NRSV, "the hand of the Lord came upon me" and affirms this powerful call of God. God reaches out and grabs Ezekiel moving him to a valley full of bones. Now commentators struggle with is this a literal valley they try to pinpoint in Palestine or is it a metaphorical vision.

I'm not sure if that matters because God does not ask Ezekiel about location, direction, or battle, God asks, can these bones live?

Wouldn't our first answer be no? Are you kidding me Lord, these bones have been left out in the sun for a long time. There is no connective tissue, the animals and birds have done their damage, no one even took a moment to properly bury these people, and even if they were a people, all of the bones are scattered to the point where this is a horrible jigsaw puzzle. We would be practical. We would be honest. We would agree that in this case, despair was rational, and hope or possibility of new life was absurd. No hope, no life, no newness, no way Lord.

Ezekiel is a prophet during the Babylonian captivity. The king was blinded, people killed, temple and Jerusalem destroyed. The rest were transported away and the few remaining in the land were not able to defend or define themselves. As two commentators note, a nation carried into captivity ceases to be a nation and the return of any people from the borders of any conqueror who had captured and deported the whole would have been viewed throughout the world of that era as a totally unimaginable. We would tend to agree.

But God grabbed Ezekiel and brought him there with a question and his answer is only you know. Ezekiel moves beyond what we see, how we may assess the situation, to deferring to God who knows if new life can come into impossible situations.

At this point, the second way God brings life by giving words to be prophesied. God gives not just words, but speaks a command into the valley through the prophet. God gave the words to Ezekiel. Ezekiel did not need to come up with a prophesy or prayer, God gave him the words.

Where there is no life, Ezekiel preaches what he is told and there begins a rustling sound. A sound reverberating through the valley as the bones came together, bone to bone with sinews and tissues forming around until there was a valley of people. Yet there was no breath in them. After these bones formed bodies, they were still dead, they needed the Spirit to enliven them.

Lastly, Ezekiel prophesied again, and God's spirit filled the bodies and they stood up a vast multitude. God tells Ezekiel, this is how the nation feels. Like dry bones without hope. But God is doing a new thing and will raise the people again. Verse 14 ends and I paraphrase, I will put my spirit in you and you shall live and I will redeem your nation and you shall know that I am the Lord who speaks and acts in the present.

God knows how the nation, carried off into exile with self-esteem crushed feels. There are plenty of times when we think God does not know. God is God, so how could he know the way I feel.

Maybe during some low moments, we think, well God is surely busy with someone else, my needs are just not that important. Scripture tells us: God knows us. God formed us and knows our possibilities and potential in life. God walks with us, God sent Jesus, God in the flesh, to teach and die for us, and the Spirit is not far away, but as close and as personal as a breath. God hears the cries of the people in Egypt, in Babylon, and still today. God does not hold back. The Spirit lives in us and we are redeemed.

The good news: God is in control. Yes, even today. Ezekiel and the people were beaten and broken. God showed up. In the first century, Palestine was occupied by the Romans and Jesus showed up. Our world has ups and downs, we've struggled, fought, and had various outcomes, the Holy Spirit shows up.

Today, we are upside down concerned with our health, our safety, our grocery shopping habits, and we're overrun by news and information. God shows up.

New life is found because we've all had an experience where God grabbed us. God walked with us through the valley of death and we made it to the other side.

God brought us calm as our world was falling apart. God picked us up from our sin and set our feet once again on solid ground.

And in those moments, rather than argue, put up a defense, or fight, all we said was, only you God know what's going to happen. We came up to that wall and our only response was, on our own, we could not get through this, but God, you know. Whatever comes next, you know.

Humility allows us to speak the words God gives us. Ezekiel did not need to do any more or less than what God told him to do.

In the fourth chapter in Acts after Pentecost, Peter and John have healed a man and are preaching about Jesus. They are brought before the Sanhedrin and asked to explain what they've been doing. Peter shares, and in verse 13 we read, when they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. Peter and John were ordinary people who shared and testified as the Spirit lead them.

We do not need to worry about our schooling or our words, God gives them to us. Now just to be fair, education, learning, and knowledge are assets, but our job is to testify to Christ in our lives and speak the honest words of faith.

One commentator notes, faith (and I would add hope) sees possibilities of life in what looks to be only death.

Once we take hold of hope, the more we share hope, as we are open to the hope God gives, then we know the power of Jesus who stands with us in all situations.

We need to claim and bring hope today.

We are being grabbed by God in a new way. We are not seeing a valley of dry bones, but we are seeing people holding on to fear, hoarding resources, suffering, and feeling isolated.

God is asking us to speak. Proclaim in this valley, God is here. To bring hope to each other, we are not alone, the Spirit is bringing us, holds us and connects us together.

Know that God's Spirit is bringing new life in these times and yes, it may not be 'back to normal', but Jesus does not work in normal, Jesus crushed death and calls us to follow. We can live the promise, God saves, Jesus redeems, and the Spirit is presently working.

This brings me back to zombies.

The verses are not about dead walking again, of humanity restored just the way we were, we see through Ezekiel it's about God showing up to redeem. God is not distant, he acts in the present with amazing love, grace, and restoring Spirit. God revived and restored nation. God is doing that now.

We too will come out of our homes and reconnect, but we don't have to wait. We don't have to be zombies without heart now.

We do not have to be one of the herd and walk around without purpose or drive. It sounds trite, but calling, writing, using technology to reach out to those around us is life giving.

Being present for our families and those in our homes putting aside all media is a redemptive act. We resist the temptation to lie down and die because we know Jesus has restored us and brings us hope to encourage each other, preparing us to see new life.

To be on the lookout, because we've slowed down, for the Spirit's active work. Like us treating the grocery store employees as human, like others sewing masks for the hospital or bringing treats and food for them, like saying hello as we walk by each other on the street, like buying needed items for those who stay in their home due to compromised immune systems, like helping children complete homework or draw or allowing us all to be creative and rest and be restored from our unsustainable lifestyles, these and so much more are where we say together, we are our neighbor's keeper and the Spirit's redeeming presence is now.

To end, I am adapting King Ezekiel's speech on the eve of a pivotal battle. Occasionally, when we are facing zombies, enemies, dark days, or isolation, we need a good speech. We need God to grab us, proclaim new life to us, fill us with the Spirit because God shows up today, so...

"We face dire challenge and chance. Our lives... our way of life... it hangs in the balance, a fragile glass standing on a wire, high above the asphalt, as we pray for not one drop of rain to push us over the edge into fear.

And into this unknown, I smile. We will fight isolation and the unknown, and we will suffer... and yet I smile.

We shall face this virus head on, not cornered into a hording mass, as desperate people tend to do. We shall overcome all of this together. This is our charge this day, God shows up.

As is our motto, the Spirit is present. And yet, I smile. We will not leave our loved ones... but traverse a dangerous road as renewed people. Rushing out into this day with peace. And yet, I smile.

For we will find glory from the rock of struggle we are going through. We will honor and protect this... bastion of life in a land of the dead, and we will win. We trust God... we will win. I smile... I laugh... I rejoice this day... for on this day, we are joined in purpose and vision of hope and new life... we are of a singular heart and mind of Christ. On this day, we are one! We are one! We are one! Amen."