

Lent 5A

So, we gather – in this somewhat artificial way for liturgical Christians – on this Fifth Sunday of Lent. We continue to experience **personal** – but hopefully not – **social** distancing from one another to make our small contribution to the battle against the COVID-19 coronavirus.

Yet, we try to stay connected online and by the telephone as the New Song community also grieves together this week the loss of one of our beloved founding members, Chuck Coulter, who died from a brain aneurysm – a malady he had, almost unbelievably, suffered once before as a young man way back in 1970! We grieve with Elizabeth today. And with so many around our nation and our world.

But I was struck last week with these thoughts from an old friend, Choctaw elder and Episcopal bishop Steven Charleston. He wrote:

‘Now is the time for which our faith has prepared us. Now is the moment when all that we believe can be put to work. Now we can turn to the inner resources we have been developing over these many years to face the challenge of a world in desperate need. We are not afraid of this crisis for we have been made ready for it. We have devoted our lives to the belief that something greater than fear or disease guides human history. We have studied, prayed, and grown in the Spirit. Now we come to the call to use what we believe. Our people need hope, confidence, courage and compassion: the very things for which we have been trained. We are the calm in the midst of a storm. Stand your ground and let your light so shine that others may see it and find their faith as well.’

I agree with him that this is what we are called to do.

There are always two dramatic stories from Scripture appointed for this particular Sunday in Lent: Ezekiel’s fantastic vision of the valley of dry bones and then John’s suspenseful account of the raising of Lazarus.

The juxtaposition of these two stories by the lectionary has actually misled people, over the years, to believe that the dry bones story in Ezekiel is about the

resurrection on the last, great day when Tradition has it that God's people will be raised from the dead, judged, and either enter into the eternal life of the kingdom or be cut off from that life forever.

And, by Ezekiel's time many Jews **did** believe that this sort of resurrection would happen at the end of the age, when the Messiah came. But that's not what Ezekiel was talking about in this passage. Ezekiel was talking about the restoration and revival of the people of Israel.

The Jewish people had been defeated by the Babylonian army and most of them – Ezekiel among them – had been shipped off into captivity where they languished for some sixty years. Now, there were signs that their long nightmare was coming to an end. So, in some kind of mystical vision, God shows Ezekiel this valley of bones and says that they represent “the whole house of Israel.” The exiles have been lamenting that their bones are dried up, their hope has perished, and that they are utterly cut off.

In fact it was likely during those days that the powerful words of today's Psalm 130 were written, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord/ Lord, hear my voice; let your ears consider well the voice of my supplication.” The exiled Israelites were in deep despair!

But now God tells the prophet to inform his people that their present situation, with all its despair, will be transformed and transformed soon. He challenges his fellow exiles to look at their circumstances, not through their own limited vision, but through God's eyes. God will end their captivity and return them to their own land. That did indeed happen in 539 BC when the Persians defeated the Babylonians and allowed the exiled Jews to return to their homeland.

As the *New Interpreter's Bible* so beautifully puts it, “Can these bones live? Of course not! But look at them through God's eyes, and watch bones rushing to their appropriate partners. Watch as ligaments bind them together, flesh blankets them, and skin seals them tightly. Watch as God's **spirit**, which heals hopelessness, **infuses** them, so that they rise up – a great army testifying to the power of Yahweh. Can corpses be brought forth from graves and become living

beings again? Absurd! But look through God's eyes, and watch them stand up, receive God's spirit, and return home. When we raise our vision to look beyond what our mundane eyes can see, we watch the impossible happen through God's eyes." (Volume VI, pages 1503-1504)

And notice this: the agent of this kind of renewal and restoration is none other than the very spirit of God. The same spirit which Paul tells us in the Epistle today brings "life and peace." The same spirit by which, according to St. John, Jesus shattered the power of death and called forth Lazarus from his tomb. The same spirit, by the way, which animates you and me, and our common life right here at New Song...even under the adverse circumstances we face today.

As we join together with our whole human family in Iowa, across this nation, and around the world in confronting the COVID-19 virus, we may feel a bit like we are in that valley of dry bones! We may wonder if even the Spirit of God can overcome the challenges we are facing, and if we will ever again have our own captivity ended, and return to the freedom of our normal, everyday lives.

Well, the late Elie Wiesel, Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, once said that "Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dried bones bears no date because **every generation** needs to hear **in its own time** that these bones can live again". Every generation needs to hear in its own time that these bones can live again!

When many of us today look around at our country and our world, when we confront again the awful reality of disease and death, we too may feel at times like we are as good as dead. Many people in our community feel null and void in these days.

But Ezekiel's vision is telling us that if we look through God's eyes, we can see the bigger picture and find reasons for hope. God can sustain us and fill the fear and emptiness of our lives with hope. Is it possible? Can these bones live? Absolutely not, the skeptics say. But look with **God's** eyes... and watch it happen!
