

## **Prophecy Deliverance:**

Sermon by Joe Summers for Sun March 9th, 2008.

(Readings for the 5th Sunday of Lent: Ezekiel 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11, John 11:1-45)

Prophecy to the bones and say to them I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.

I want to begin today by reflecting on the living dead. That's who we're talking about in this amazing story from Ezekiel. We're talking about living people who are dead inside, people who feel so totally cut off from hope ("our hope is lost-we are cut off completely") that they are like the dry bleached bones on a field where there was a battle long ago.

What can put us in a place that it is like we are already underground in our graves--even though we are up and walking around? So many things... so many awful things can happen to you, or those around you, or maybe even your parents or ancestors, that can leave you in such a state. So many things that can leave you so disconnected that it is like parts of yourself are scattered like bones across a field, or living in a world so disconnected--you don't even know what it is to be connected.

Sometimes things happen to us such that it is like death comes and sets up house within us. Some grief's are so overwhelming our minds can't take them in, as when in her book *The Year of Magical Thinking* Joan Didion describes how she held onto her beloved husband's shoes for months after he had died, so he'd have something to wear when he came home again. Those were the thoughts and actions of someone others thought was still coping. As when those who experience some shocking grief become so disconnected from their bodies that they end up really cold --even when it's hot outside. Simone Weil speaks of how, when you lose someone or something that's been essential to you, it's like there's this spiritual energy that has no where to go and so it can leave you mindlessly running around like a chicken that's lost it's head, or turn in on you and leave you experiencing a kind of spiritual lethargy that's a something akin to death. Sometimes, you can't emerge from that grief, it's like your frozen in it, and that's when you feel like one of the walking dead.

I believe our story about Lazarus was the story that the prostitute in *Crime and Punishment* held onto--to keep her faith alive, to keep herself alive. I know for me it became a kind of manual for how to begin to come back to life. First, try to get the enormous bolder out of the entrance to my heart. Then come out into the light to rejoin the living even though I still felt like I was dead. Then years of unwrapping the invisible layers of cloth that seemed to be wrapped around me so that I could begin to directly experience people and things again. And throughout all this time, praying, praying, praying: "God would take my hearts of stone and give me a heart of flesh again."

What happens to us individually also can happen to us collectively, as illustrated in Ezekiel's vision of the people of his country as all in their graves, as in a State like ours where people are so disconnected from each other and from what's vital that they spend more on incarcerating young people than they do on educating them, as in the wealthiest society in history, which

can't seem to find the passion or the will to do what needs to be done to ensure the well being of the world and its peoples and our planet, even though this could be done for less money than we are currently spending on war, as in a world where people continue to tolerate small elites who deprive the great majority of what's essential for life because those are the customs we have inherited from the past. We are like those dry bones scattered across a barren field. Unless we come together, bone to bone, unless we come back to life, unless we collectively let the Spirit infuse us-- I believe our spiritual reality will become a material reality.

But how can we collectively come back to life? I think it needs to begin with ourselves. It needs to begin with our asking the Holy Spirit to bring us back to life, for as Paul says in our lesson from Romans today, the same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead, can give life to our mortal bodies through the Spirit that dwells in us (even if part of us is so sad we don't want to live anymore). We need to hear that cry---"Come out!"-- and we need to respond. We need to bring into the light, we need to let the breath infuse, whatever parts of ourselves that have become lost through disconnection, whatever parts of ourselves that can no longer feel, whatever parts of ourselves that have grown closed and hardened. We need to let God smash, our hearts of stone, hearts that can't feel, hearts that aren't really alive, so that we can gain hearts of flesh again. We need to say, "Yes---though I've experienced death---I am willing to live again, I want to live again and I believe you can bring me back to life. I will leave this tomb whose darkness has grown so comfortable. Despite however smelly I've grown in the darkness-- I will come back into the land of the living."

I just want to be clear that if birth is messy and has strong odors, coming back to life after death is all that much more messy and stinky, and trying to be polite is not going to cut it. If Lazarus was too worried about what others thought he would have listened to those who said: "leave him in there, for God's sake he's been dead four days, he really stinks!" So often I find people stuck in death because they are afraid of disturbing others or making others feel bad. Well...living death is something to feel bad about. If coming back to life shakes people up, if it doesn't seem very polite or disturbs their ideas about who we are---than so be it. Those ideas need to crumble because our lived reality is so much much more important than any of the idols we, or others, have created about who we are. As we heard in our lesson from Ephesians last week, everything that the light shines on becomes light, but the inverse is also true. We can't come back to life if things remain in the darkness, if we're consumed with keeping things secret. Here I'm not talking about proclaiming whatever you are dealing with all over town, but I am talking about whether your energy is caught up with maintaining appearances, or doing whatever you need to do to come back to life.

But our lessons today have a further challenge. It is not enough for us simply to come back to life. We are called to prophesy deliverance. Prophecy is a verb we rarely use. We may use the word prophecy, a noun that refers to some powerful word that was spoken in the past, but rarely do we use the word prophesy--that is to speak the living, giving transformative Word, the Word that is the Breath infusing some situation, the Word that can make bone come together with bone, and sinews and muscles to grow upon them, the Word that can gather the four winds to

infuse the dead with the living breath, the Word that calls us out of our tombs and back into the land of the living.

Prophesy deliverance! That is, go forth and speak this creating Word, transformative Word, that we might call each other back to life, that we might encourage one another in this strange new world of life after death, that we might call a traumatized, deeply grief stricken, humanity back to wholeness, for our sake, and the sake of all creation. Amen.