

Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
Knoxville, Tennessee
Rev. Andy Morgan, Fountain City Presbyterian Church
May 3, 2020

“Not Here: God in the Rattling”
Ezekiel 37:1-14

Sometimes our sense of hopelessness can be so dire, so certain, so grim, that we may feel that God isn't present, that God isn't here. As we continue this sermon series called “Not Here”, where we explore instances in Scripture and in our own lives when God seems to not be present, we come to the tension of hopelessness and the presence of God. We may all have some experience in which our hope was so dried up that we felt far from God's presence. I certainly have felt that feeling before.

Before I felt called to ministry, I was a thriving businessperson. Well, I should qualify that statement a little better. Let's say WELL before I felt called to ministry (in the 5th grade), I was a relatively-to my classmates- thriving businessperson. In 5th grade I transformed my locker into a warehouse for a thriving grey market of candy and snacks that ran rampant at Stanfield Elementary School. My parent's friend, Alan, drove the Lance snack truck and would often give me boxes of honeybuns, crackers, and candy that would “fall off his truck”. You don't need an MBA for the Wharton School to know that we're talking 100% margin here, and I was making big bucks. Each .25 piece of candy, or my daily deal of 4 for a dollar (not really a “deal” as much, per say, as much as it was a sort of 5th grade flex to let folks know I knew fractions) each quarter and crumpled dollar added up. I'm talking 5-6 dollars a day, serious money for an elementary school student but I had a plan on how I was going to use it. Coolness then, like now, had a cost. A low cost in the grand scheme of things, not as expensive as a Ferrari or a cool Vol Navy boat, but still prohibitively expensive for me. Coolness could be purchased, I assessed, for the price of Airwalk skating shoes. Was I a skater, absolutely not, but I was willing to pony up 50 bucks to be a poser if that meant I got the coveted “cool table” pass. So, each pecan pie, every chocolate peanut butter candy or fruit chew sold out of my locker represented a fraction of hope to make my move to 5th grade coolness.

Well one day, a classmate (we'll call her Brittney, because that was her name) asked for a transaction during class change, in this case she wanted a 6 peanut butter candies. Wow, that's \$1.50, this is turning out to be a big day. I handed her the candy and waited for the other part of the deal. That'll be \$1.50 a reminded her (not everyone was as good at arithmetic). I'm not going to pay, she said. And you're not going to tell on me because you're not supposed to be selling stuff out of your locker. Wow. True. Then her hand went into my locker and gripped about 30 pieces of candy. I was getting mugged, right there in the hallway in plain sight, but millions of miles away from help. I had to do something. “Gimme back my candy!” Ineffective. “Come on, that's not funny!” Very true, but it had no effect. I had to stand my ground, I reached and tried to pull the candy out of her hand. Big mistake.

That day I got shoved, hit in the stomach (I think), and she did something that I thought was off the table...she grabbed the break-a-way denim pants I was wearing and pulled them off.

I know you probably have a lot of questions about this. Was this actually just a stress dream that you then woke up from? Did you really have break-a-way pants? Yes. Why do break-a-way pants exist for elementary school students (why would they be denim)? I don't know, those are good questions. Did she take the candy? Yes. Did folks see this? Yes. Did they laugh? No, actually folks were very compassionate...of course they laughed! And laughed and laughed and laughed.

This is the kind of thing that spreads around the school pretty quickly. If you do something nice (get student of the month) or good (A/B honor roll), folks may not know about it...if a candy deal goes wrong and you get your break-a-way pants ripped off, people find out and it sort of then defines you as a human person. Well, my hope of being cool...of using my candy money to purchase my way into the cool group was pretty much out of reach at that point; you don't really come back from that, people don't forget, and you end up using it as a sermon illustration more than 20 years later. I can laugh about it now, but at that time, it was one of the more hopeless experiences of my life because my hope of being cool and fitting in and being popular was squashed, far way, dried up. There was little chance of coming back from that.

We all probably have had experiences or feelings (maybe not so dramatic, maybe far more serious) in which we felt that hope was far away or even impossible...where all logic pointed us to the gloom and the certainty of a fate we did not want. Failing a test in school, a difficult season with your wife or partner, a bad business deal, a terrifying diagnosis, the unpredictable enormity of grieving the death of a loved one, a breakup or divorce, a wayward child, literally the state of the world right now. Hope seems far away, impossible even. There may have been these experiences of hopelessness in all of our lives when our dreams for the present and the future seem dried up like a field of bones. In these moments of hopelessness where the boundless possibilities of our lives are whittled down to some terrible and certain fate, where normal and comfortable are things of the past, where uncertainty and fear are our future, we can appropriately wonder where God is. It seems, in these moments, that God's not here because hope does not seem to be present. What happens then, when our hope seems dried up? Where do we find God?

This is, no doubt, how the Jewish people felt during the period of the exile, the context of our Old Testament text, when God's people had been exiled from their homes and led into a foreign place, away from the destroyed temple, away from sovereign rule, away from theological and social and political and economic normalcy. A battered, defeated, displaced people found themselves desperate for hope, seeking a return to the way things were, longing for normal and comfortable, but only saw uncertainty and fear in their present and future. No hope, maybe we can relate. And some of the writings from this era asked the brave question that we might feel in these moments or seasons of hopelessness...is God here?

The Book of Ezekiel gives us a window into this life of despair for the Jewish people through the lens of Ezekiel ben-Buzi, a priest and prophet who was carried away in the Babylonian exile and who prophesied to the Jewish people in the midst of all this, helping them to understand why these circumstances were so and giving them a sense of what could be coming. One of the central

roles of a prophet, then or now, was essentially to disagree with the prevalent worldview. If folks thought things were going fine and the injustice of the world was no big deal...well, folks like Ezekiel would disagree. No, you're not fine because injustice is not fine. And then, if folks felt that hope was truly lost, they would disagree, which is what we find in the passage I am about to read.

The exilic period was an unthinkable difficult time for the Jewish people, politically and theologically, and by the time we come to chapter 37, we see that the Jewish people have lost hope, Ezekiel, through this vision from God, offers disagreement in a message that gave those who heard this in Exile and us, today, hope. Let's hear it, this is Ezekiel's third oracle, and is found in chapter 37, I'll be reading verses 1-14.

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵ Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹ 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.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

This is the Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God.

Sometimes we have to make best guess at what context or set of circumstances a vision in scripture might be addressing, but verses 11-14 make it clear. These bones represented the hopelessness of Jewish people. Hope was lost for the Exilic Jews, God seemed distant, absent, not here. The field of bones represented that state of hope for the Jewish people. Behold, there were many, behold, they were very dry. No coming back from this, no bright future, no rebuilt temple, no return to former glory...their future was dead, their dreams were dead, their sense of safety and normalcy was dead, their hope was dead...their hope was not only dead; it was dried up. The temple was rubble, men and women were killed or carted off (their future with them),

God seemed to be absent. This condition was beyond grim and their future hope of a return to normal was as improbable as the bones in this vision standing up and becoming alive again.

And so, in this exchange, God leads Ezekiel around the valley to fully take in the hopelessness. This is important for us, for anyone wondering where God is in the midst of hopelessness, God is present in the confrontation with the enormity of the despair. The same spirit that led Ezekiel to see all of those metaphorical representations of hopelessness was the one who brought life to them. God is with us in our faithful and honest look at the bones of our lives...when we are brave enough to acknowledge the hurt in our lives (not dismissively and not ignorantly, but with hope) God is present with us in the midst of our valleys.

He was with Ezekiel and then said to him..."Mortal, can these bones live?" Is there hope? Do you believe that the future of fear and uncertainty is the only one? Do you recognize that God is present? "O Lord God, you know." The vision unfolds, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones (these things that represented their hopelessness) and they would live again...live again and know that God is Lord (hope is real and possible through God's presence). And so, Ezekiel does and the bones begin to rattle, the text says that suddenly there was a noise, a rattling (Hebrew it's ra-ash...it's most often translated to mean earthquake, but I love the translation "rattling"). The bones rattled, quaked, shook, and came back together, bone by bone. Hope was reformed and life was breathed into them by God...the text says that, through this, the people of Israel (with hope so dry and abundant it looked like a valley of bones) will live again and through this, they will know God is Lord. God is there.

This rattling of hope being reformed and restored gave Ezekiel, and the exilic Jews who heard this, a place to look for the presence of God in the midst of the very dire, metaphorical valley of hopelessness in their lived experience. God is present when we honestly acknowledge the hurt and hopelessness in our lives and God makes himself known (if we're listening) in the rattling of re-forming hope, of small acts of restoration that connect, bone by bone, to resurrected hope.

How in the world can a field of dry bones live? How can the decimated future of the exilic Jews be restored? How can our marriages be saved? How can our economy turn around? How can we ever enjoy the mundane comfort of simply going to Target just to look around? How can we ever find hope again? Well, by acknowledging that we feel hopeless, to look at the valley, to recognize that only hope could come from God...and then to listen to the rattling.

I don't know about you, but I have seen the same valley of dry bones that Ezekiel saw. It's not a place, it's a vision, and the bones he saw were their disconnected and uncertain future. The bones I have seen back in 5th grade was my hope of popularity, propped up by cool Air Walk skating shoes being replaced by the circulating story of getting my break-a-way pants ripped off during a mugging during class change. Behold there were many. Behold they were very dry. I have seen the hopeless valley recently, littered with more serious things like camp closure, an empty church on Easter, daily death tolls that keep going up, partisan arguments, existential boredom...all things that make me feel that going back to "normal" is as feasible as a bunch of dry bones living again. Behold, there were many. Behold they were very dry. Have you seen the valley? I bet you have. What dry bones have you seen in your own life?

Behold, there were many. Behold they were very dry. God's question to the prophet, can these bones live? Is hope possible? Is a question to us as well. Can we return to normal? Can we kick the addiction? Can we reconcile with our family member? When all these things seem so hopeless? Can we find God's presence in the midst of the valley? God knows that hope is never out of reach. And we can be aware of God's presence with us when we honestly acknowledge our hurts and listen for his presence in the rattling of the small acts of hope being restored, as bone by bone, hope is resurrected.

In the same way that I have seen the bones scattering the valley, I have also heard the rattling of hope being restored. Every phone call or card from my people, encouraging me, letting me know I'm being prayed for, I hear the rattling. Every act of generosity and selflessness reported on the news, showing that people value the lives of one another, I hear rattling. When we apologize to one another, when we forgive one another, when we go one more day without that drink, when we look at ourselves with a little more kindness, we can hear the rattling. Bone by bone, hope is being restored. Have you heard the rattling?

Have you seen the valley? Have you acknowledged the bones? Behold there were many, behold they were very dry. God is with us in that. Where do you hear the rattling of resurrected hope in your own life? God is in the rattling.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**