

**Fifth Sunday of Lent**  
**Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**  
**3-26-2023**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Hopelessness is not an event, but a process. It grows by degrees, little by little, over time. Hopelessness starts with the awareness of our deficits. Whatever small the challenge or difficulty, we feel as though we don't have the abilities, skills, resources, energy, or will to solve it. So, we often do nothing, or do very little. When the next crisis arrives, we add to that feeling of ineptitude or deficit and say to ourselves, "There is no way I can do anything about this." We rely on others to solve the problem for us, and we don't even try. And then, the next, and the next emergency, and at some point we are engulfed in deficit. "There is just no way I can do this, there is no one who can help me, I feel completely abandoned, I am just too weak and insufficient, my life is just over, all I can do is sit and wait for a grace, I just don't have the spirit I used to have.

For hopelessness to work, we have to accept a few cognitive distortions. Hopelessness attacks our minds before it does our bodies. We start thinking a few thoughts that are not quite right: "We are not enough, we don't have what it takes to do what needs to get done, and because we cannot do something the way we used to do it before, there is no value in trying to do it differently. Either I can go all the way, or I won't go at all!" Then, once these distorted thoughts convince us of our profound disabilities and ineptitude, they begin to attack our view of others. "No one loves me, if they loved me they would solve my problems before I even tell them about them. No one cares for me, and if they did, I wouldn't be this alone. I thought joining a club or a church would solve my problems, but my church doesn't care about me, all they want is my money! I tried so hard with my children, but they don't even visit anymore, etc." Finally, our distorted thoughts attack our faith in God. "God has abandoned me, perhaps he really doesn't exist or he doesn't love me. Maybe God he is too busy for me. Perhaps if I were more pious, perhaps if I gave more to the church. God is just so far from me. I have no future left, only the grave awaits for me."

This is the problem Ezekiel is describing today about the people of God in the Babylon's captivity. They say, "Our story is completely over, we are destined to be like the many people groups who have disappeared from the face of the earth. We are like the Hittites, Jebusites, and other people who no longer exist. Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely. God is done with us; God has either turned away from us completely or he actually never really cared. There is no hope left in us, all that is left is to wait for history to completely obliterate our memory from the records of the world, as though we never existed.

The people of God have been in Babylon for decades and they see no way back home. It is against this background that God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to them. Although they feel as completely dead as dry bones scattered in a field, God is in control of their destiny. God “will bring them back to the land of Israel. And they shall know that God is the Lord. God will open their graves, and he will put his own spirit within them, and they shall live. God will place them on their own soil; then they shall know that God, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”

The preaching of hope when we have convinced ourselves of our complete failures and deficits sounds like make-believe language, fairy tales meant to make us feel better in the moment, but void of any real substance and truth. This too is cognitive dissonance. This too is the result of our faulty thinking. Many of us have convinced ourselves that unless our life looks and feels exactly how we imagined it in our minds, then it is no life at all, and God has completely failed us. This all or nothing view of life is responsible for much of our unhappiness. Just because you can't run a ten-mile marathon as you did when you were thirty, it doesn't mean that God doesn't want you to walk a mile around your neighborhood. Because you are no longer a leader of hundreds of people it doesn't mean that God no longer wants you to exercise your God-given leadership skills. Because your physical abilities slow down a bit in older age, it doesn't mean you just need to sit around and wait for the end. God is the Lord of the living, and with him there is always life. We just need to be aware that we are surrounded by God's presence and this life is always transforming and changing us.

The people of God looked longingly towards Jerusalem and felt that because they were no longer within the walled city, God was no longer with them. Somehow, God stayed behind and didn't make the journey with them. In the meantime, they forget that God is calling them into a new life in their own context. The prophet Jeremiah has seen this problem and has strongly attacked this hopelessness as faithlessness. Jeremiah sent them a letter asking them to marry and give into marriage, to buy homes and plant gardens. To pray for the welfare of Babylon because in the progress of their host country God would eventually help them find their own happiness. God can be found in Babylon, just as surely as God could be found in Jerusalem. All the people of God needed to do was open their eyes to God's blessings around them. All they needed was to challenge their faulty ideas about God and to see him in their new context.

Now, Ezekiel adds a word of comfort, similar to Isaiah's own “Comfort, Comfort ye, my people” (Isa 40:1 ff). Israel is still in God's thoughts and aspirations. God's heart is filled with dreams for the future life of his people. God is filled with resurrection for anyone who wants a new life. Even if the hopelessness in your life is so old that it is now smelling like Lazarus' body, God can still lead you into new life and happiness. Your life is not ended. While you were busy thinking your days were over, God was busy placing

new life around your context. The problem is that you have been so self-preoccupied that you have failed to see the new flowers growing in the garden, the beautiful young family that just moved next door, that phone call you received from a friend you haven't seen in years, the new Indian restaurant someone opened a block away, the new knitters group your church just created, the opportunities for service around the corner, that great new book by your favorite author, and thousands more signs of life.

Life is not composed of binary principles in perpetual fights against each other. Dozens of variations exist in between seemingly opposite realities. The poles of life and death, top performance or complete inactivity, black or white, all in or all out, loved or despised, with me or against me... All of these poles are extremes that diminish who we are and make us less than the people God created us to be. The truth is that there are unlimited colors between black and white, and God wants you to enjoy them all. The truth is that there are miles and miles between my way or the highway, and God wants to be aware of this distance and to travel some of it before God calls you home. There is a great distance between top performance and complete inactivity, and God wants you to enjoy your life at every stage of your life, even if you are no longer the mover and shaker you used to be. Memories are extremely important and God wants you to keep them and celebrate them, but do not believe even for one second that God doesn't want you to create new memories. To stay stuck in some of those memories is to allow nostalgia to diminish your faith and your hope. Celebrate the aches and pains of life, knowing that there is vindication for those who suffer and that you can find God present in your life even in the midst of your pain and your fears.

God is in control of our lives and he is not the God of the past and the God of the future, as some of us believe. God was with me in the past, guiding me to success, wealth, relationships, and a great family. But he is done with all of that. He stayed back in Jerusalem. He didn't make the journey with us. Now, we wait until we see him again in a future heaven promised to us at Baptism. Now, we wait for the great party at that holy mountain of Isaiah 25. Now, we wait for the streets of gold of our childhood Sunday school stories. If this is how you feel, you are at the same place of our historic Israel today. Ezekiel has a message for you. God is the God of the eternal present. God is here in this moment, at this time and place. He is still generating life in you. He is transforming you this very day. Reconnect with life. See him in every blade of grass. See him next to you, because he is in the business of connecting bone to bone, he is in the business of breathing new life into decaying bones, he is in the business of new birth and restoration.

May he continue to be with you, amen!