

“Hard Times”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – March 26, 2023

Ezekiel 37:1-14

I do not know how many of you have seen the movie *Sister Act*, but if you haven't, you probably should. It is filled with good humor, but it also makes a marvelous point. In the movie, a casino singer witnesses a gangster execution and then agrees to testify. In order to protect this woman, the police hustle her off to an inner-city convent in San Francisco to pose as a nun so they can keep her hidden and safe until the trial.

She talks at the wrong time, fails to get up with she is supposed to and gets herself into all kinds of trouble. And finally, not knowing what to do with her, they send her to practice with the choir. Now I could not imagine any choir being as bad as this one was portrayed.

It did not take long until this atypical nun had that convent rocking and reeling, and singing and swaying, and the church began to fill up with people. The doors were unbarred, the windows were opened, the convent became the center of life for the community. There was a breath of fresh air blowing.

The place that had been a valley of the bones, where all hope was lost, became alive and thriving, something like the song, “*Dem Bones*.”

“*Dem Bones*” was a vision of Ezekiel, and I want you to hang onto the word “vision,” because Ezekiel did not actually have this happen to him; rather, God gave Ezekiel a vision so that he might be able to help God's chosen people through a rough period in their lives. Let me remind you about that time for God's people.

It was in the year of 597 BC. The Babylonians had just destroyed everything. Nothing was left. The walls were leveled, the city burned. The temple was plundered. The leading citizens were killed or enslaved. King Zedekiah was caught and forced to watch the execution of his family and then blinded before he was taken into exile.

It seemed that for God's people the glory had departed. They were defeated, degraded, dejected, humiliated, broken, plundered, and sent into exile into a foreign land. Sometimes during Lent, we use the symbol of an instrument to remember that they hung their lyres in the willow tree and sat down to weep.

And if that was not bad enough, their Babylonian captors came along and required them to sing songs and told them to act as if they were happy.

Out of their pain they cried out to Ezekiel, *“BEHOLD, OUR BONES ARE DRIED UP, OUR HOPE IS LOST, WE ARE CUT OFF...”* AND SO *“HOW CAN WE SING THE LORD’S SONG IN A FOREIGN LAND?”*

Now, get the picture: they were not physically dead! They were not bodies of bones scattered in the desert, but they felt like they would have been better off if they were dead! Now their temple, their priests, the liturgies, and the place to sacrifice were destroyed and they felt like they were cut off from God.

And they must have wondered why God would let this happen. After all, they were God’s chosen people, **“Was God too weak to protect them?” they wondered. “Or was God dead?”**

Through Ezekiel, God lets them know that they should not give up hope. After receiving the vision from God that said, *“IT IS TIME TO BREATHE NEW LIFE INTO THE PEOPLE,”* Ezekiel encouraged them. He helped them to make plans for a new temple, a new city, a new life. And with the coming of Cyrus some 50 or so years later, the order was issued for the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple.

Now notice that I said, “Some 50 years later.” This was not an instant thing. Hope was not restored in a day, nor was Jerusalem rebuilt in a year. And yet so often we expect that to happen. Our life falls apart because of some happening, we become the valley of dry bones, and we expect immediate answers. We get impatient and wonder where our God is.

We have all been through that, in one way or another. Perhaps the greatest hope we can have today comes from looking back on our own valleys of bones. When we realize that God has always been there, we then become more certain that God will continue to be there for us! For some of us we are talking about dry bones being “not getting what we really thought that we should have for Christmas;” and for some of us it has been the pain of divorce or the loss of a spouse. Still others have cried and cried when that last child left home, and they felt lost and lonely.”

Some of you have gone through a loss of a business or the family farm, had a pregnancy to end in miscarriage, gotten word that your son or daughter’s marriage was in trouble or had an accident to claim the life of a friend or family member.

All of us have lived through those times. And as we lived through them, we cried out to God, wondering whether God was even there. And our bones felt dried out, cut off! In fact, even right now, there are problems that are breaking our hearts.

But I also ask you, have you seen a tulip sprouting through? Have you seen a robin? Have you seen some geese flying back north? Is there some green grass in your lawns? Is not God's world full of promise, full of hope, full of renewal? Indeed,

“In the bulb, there is a flower,
in the seed an apple tree,
in cocoons a hidden promise,
butterflies will soon be free.
In the cold and snow of winter,
there's a spring that waits to be,
unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.” (*Hymn of Promise, Sleeth*)

Chuck Swindoll tells us in his book, *Come Before Winter*, “Life with all its pressures and inequities, tears and tragedies, can be lived on a level above the miseries. If it cannot, Christianity has little to offer, and Jesus is reduced to nothing more than an apologetic beggar at the back door with his hat in his hands and a hard-luck story you can either take or leave.”

Do not believe **that** for even a moment. In our Gospel, we hear Jesus say, “*I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE EVEN THOUGH HE DIES; AND WHOEVER LIVES AND BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE.*”

In our end, is our beginning;
in our time, infinity;
in our doubt, there is believing;
in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection,
at the last, a victory.
Unrevealed until its season,
something God alone can see.” (*Hymn of Promise, Sleeth*)

Amen.