

Dry Bones Rattling: New Things Coming

September 12, 2021

Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

Isaiah 43:16-21; Mark 2:18-22

So today we are continuing the conversation that we started a couple of weeks ago – a conversation all about God’s hope, God’s promise, God’s new-ness in the face of chaos and turmoil. In this series that we have titled “Dry Bones Rattling,” based on the story of Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones – a story in which God brings a valley full of dry, dusty, dead, and forgotten bones back to life again – we are exploring stories and passages in scripture in which God reveals to us, over and over and over again, that no matter what we walk through; no matter how difficult life may seem; no matter how tired and worn-out or even hopeless we might feel in the moment, we have a God who is bigger than life and death; a God who is bigger than our biggest struggles; bigger than all those things that overwhelm and frustrate us.

Today we are actually looking at not one, but two stories. Two passages that, at their outset, couldn’t be more different from each other. But two stories that are actually deeply-connected to each other within the overarching story of God’s people, and that offer to us the very same message of hope.

Our story from Isaiah was written, like the story we read two weeks ago from the book of Ezekiel, during the time of the Babylonian exile – when the people of Israel had been driven from their home and homeland and were desperately looking for signs of life and hope when they had been stripped of almost everything in their lives that made them who they were. They found themselves constantly looking backward at everything they had lost. And in their anger, and fear, and grief, and sorrow, they couldn’t see beyond this enormous dark cloud that was constantly hovering over them, blinding them to God’s unrelenting and ongoing presence with them.

In contrast, our story from Mark was written close to 500 years later. 500 years is a long time, and a lot can happen in that time. During Isaiah’s story, the people doubted whether or not they would survive their present reality. But the Babylonian empire rose, and it fell. And then the Persian empire rose, and it fell. The Greek empire, under the rule of Alexander the Great, rose and fell – we don’t hear a lot about this period of time in the Bible, because it was taking place between the Old and New Testaments, but it was a major and important period in world history. And still, God’s people continued on.

And then the Roman empire rose and the curtain opens on the New Testament. And everything is different. The language is different – last time we saw God’s people, they were speaking Hebrew. And now, they are speaking Greek. It used to be that the important religious leaders were the prophets. And now, the prophets are basically gone, and they’ve been replaced by the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, and the scribes – keepers of the faith and tradition. The temple that had been previously destroyed has

now been re-built, and although it is still important to the people, the people now spend a lot less time in the temple and a lot more time in their local synagogues.

And yet, one thing has not changed. And that is that the Jewish community still continues to hold fast to their tradition and to their stories. They tell their stories, and they internalize them. They tell the stories of the Judges, and of 1 and 2 Samuel, when the people would get into a bit of a scrape, and they would repent and turn to God, with fasting and prayer, and God would save the people from their enemies the Philistines. And when the 1st Century Jewish community would remember this story, they would fast, and they would pray – in an effort not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

They remembered the story of the destruction of Jerusalem back in Isaiah's day, and how the people failed to be God's people and how their homes and temple were destroyed because of it. But then, the people repented. They turned back to God. They fasted. And they prayed. And God restored to them their home. And when the people would remember this centuries-old story, they too would fast, and they would pray. They would confess their sin, in hopes that in so doing God would not bring upon them another similar destruction.

One thing that the Pharisees, and the religious leaders, and really the entire Jewish community knew and got right, was that they had to know their history. They had to stay tethered in to their stories, in order never to repeat the mistakes of their ancestors. The problem came, though, when they got so rigid about this that they stopped *remembering* their past, and instead started *living in* their past. They started putting so much emphasis on not repeating their parents' mistakes that they would become fixated on the practices and forget the why behind it all.

So, they would fixate on the Sabbath – and on all of the rules around what to do and what not to do on the Sabbath – so much so that they would forget why the Sabbath day exists in the first place. And the same thing with fasting. Fasting started off as a way to remember their story – who they were, where they came from – and to lead them into a space of ongoing repentance and reconciliation with God so that they could be freed to take their next steps in faith. But somewhere along the line, in their efforts to remember their stories, they forgot that the point was not about the fasting and the prayer, but about the freedom that God gives them in an act of true repentance.

So in our story from Mark's gospel, Jesus is approached by some folks who are a little bit confused. "Jesus," they ask, "why is it that the people who follow the teachings of the Pharisees fast, but *your* disciples do not?"

"Because they do not need to," Jesus replies. "Fasting is about recognizing our sinfulness, grieving that, and turning from that into the light of God's grace – into the joy of salvation. It is important, and it has its place. But my disciples are living in this light *right now*. They don't need to adjust course, because they are already where they need to be. The time will come when they will find themselves once again mired down

by darkness and pain and brokenness, and at that time, fasting and repentance and turning around will once again be appropriate. But that time is not *now*.

And then, Jesus takes it a step further. “You don’t sew a new patch of unshrunk fabric onto an old garment. And you don’t pour new wine into an old wineskin,” Jesus says. “Otherwise, it will tear and become useless.” Stop trying to fit your new life, here and now, into the past. Because it does not fit. And in fact, it does more harm than it does good.

Life has changed in the 500 years since the exile. So stop living as though you are still in exile. Because you’re not. And in your constant looking back, your constant acting-out of that story, you are missing what God is doing right now. Because you are still trying to seek God’s presence in Babylon, you are completely missing the fact that God is here, talking to you, in flesh and blood, right now.

And the irony, is that God had said the very same thing to the Israelites in exile, 500 years previously: “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

And God says the same thing to us today.

This weekend, we sit at the 20th Anniversary of 9/11 – that horrible day when terrorists hijacked airplanes and flew them into the twin towers, killing thousands. For my son’s social studies project this week, he was given the assignment to talk to somebody who remembers that day – and to ask them, “what were you doing when you heard the news?” And I think that most of us can probably answer that question very clearly, almost like that memory exists as a High Definition video recording. I can barely remember what I had for breakfast this morning, and yet I can remember that moment in time 20 years ago just as clearly as if it were happening right now.

Other generations have other similar “defining” moments, or seasons, in history. The Great Depression. The bombing of Pearl Harbor. The assassination of JFK. The moon landing. The Civil Rights Movement. We are still living through it right now so it is hard to know how it will affect us long-term, but I would imagine that 20 years from now we will probably look back and point to COVID-19 as a defining season in our lives.

And as individuals, probably most of us have more personal stories of things that happened in our past that served as turning points for us, where before that moment, life looked one way, and after that moment, everything looked different. In my life, the divorce of my parents was one such event, and the loss of my first pregnancy was another. For some people, the death of a loved one, or an abusive relationship, or a cancer diagnosis, or a run-in with the law – really, just about *any* traumatic life experience – whether it is personal or societal, or even global – it’s almost as if our very souls take a picture of that moment in time and over the course of our lives we keep being drawn back to that picture, and living our lives based on that picture. In the extreme, that’s where PTSD comes from – our bodies and minds get confused, and act

as though they are still living in that picture from the past. But even for the rest of us, it can be really easy for us to get stuck there. Get stuck in what “used to be,” get stuck in what “once was,” get stuck in our own “Babylons” and fail to see what God is doing now, 500 years later.

“Remember your story, and learn from it,” God tells us, “but then, don’t get stuck there. Don’t stay there. Because today’s world needs you here, today. I have work for you to do. Today. Work that you cannot do if you are forever stuck in yesterday.”

And so, as we look back and we remember – as we remember the stories of the people of God throughout scripture; as we remember our stories throughout history; as we remember the stories of our personal lives, both the beautiful and the challenging moments, let us cling fast only to this: that the God who has always been with us, will always continue to be with us. Let us remember that God was with Adam and Eve in the Garden. God was with the slaves in Egypt and with the wanderers in the wilderness. God was with the Israelites in exile. God was here through the rise and fall of many dynasties. God was here in Christ, in flesh and blood. Physically here. With us. As us. God was here in the hearts and the passion of the apostles as the church was birthed. God has been here through the church’s growing pains, and missteps, and mistakes, and failings, and joys and triumphs and successes for the last 2,000+ years.

God was here as people scraped to make ends meet during the Great Depression. God was here during the pain and chaos of the Civil Rights movement. God has been here through countless wars and struggles and battles and fights. God was here 20 years ago as we saw the World Trade Center crumble to pieces, and God is here now as we try to figure out how to be the body of Christ in a world that is so different from anything we have ever seen before.

God is here. And God is moving. Breathing. Acting. Redeeming. Transforming. God is still at work creating and birthing new life among us.

“For behold, I am about to do a new thing,” declares the Lord. “And even now it is springing forth. Do you not perceive it?”

My friends, may we open our eyes this day and glimpse the beauty of our God who is alive and active, right here and right now.