

11/8/09 – Ezekiel 37:1-17; Ps 137:1-6; Rom 8:18-25; John 11:17-27 – When God Seems Absent

What's the lowest moment you've ever experienced in your life? Take a moment and think about that. What was the darkest moment? What did it feel like? We all have low moments when life seems to conspire against us, when God seems absent or at least slow to do anything about the situation in which we find ourselves. On the cross Jesus had such a moment as he gave voice to the words of the Psalmist (22:1-2): "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest." Have you ever given voice to those words? Have you ever had one of those moments when all of the promises of God are called into question and you feel utterly alone in the world?

Today's Old Testament readings are one such moment in the life of God's people. King Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army had crushed the Israelites and laid waste to Jerusalem and the temple. The Israelites were bruised and beaten. Their alliances with neighboring countries had been to no avail. All of God's promises lay in the rubble of the temple stones, the very place where the all-powerful God was thought to dwell, and in the pile of stones which once served as the protective city wall lay the promise of an everlasting dynasty of Davidic kings. Adding insult to injury, the leading citizens and artisans were exiled to Babylon to serve as part of the King's court and to prevent future uprisings in the land.

The words of the psalmist give voice to the pathos of the situation. "Alongside Babylon's rivers we sat on the banks; we cried and cried, remembering the good old days in Zion. Alongside the quaking aspens we stacked our unplayed harps. That's where our captors demanded songs, sarcastic and mocking: 'Sing us a happy Zion song!' Oh, how could we ever sing God's song in this wasteland?" (The Message)

In the wasteland of life, how can we possibly sing God's song? How can we sing when we've been abused or betrayed by a spouse, terminated from a job, diagnosed with cancer, had a child injured or deathly ill, lost our house in foreclosure or a parent in death? How can we sing when we find ourselves homeless, hungry, without a job and healthcare; when random acts of violence maim or kill people we love? In these dark moments of despair when it's all we can do to get one foot in front of the other, when everything we had hoped for has been snatched from our grasp, how is it possible to trust in God's promise and sing God's praise?

This is where the psalm and the story of the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37 become so important. Both stories remind us that while we may never understand the suffering we experience, God steps into our suffering and walks with us. Sometimes our suffering is a consequence of our actions; sometimes we are victims of other people's actions. It's precisely when we come to one of life's dead-ends that we are to open our eyes so that we might behold what God is up to. "God grabbed me," writes Ezekiel. "God's Spirit took me up and sat me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them – a lot of bones! He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' I said, 'Master God, only you know that.' He said to me, 'Prophecy over these bones: Dry bones, listen to the Message of God! ... I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you will come to life. ... You will come alive and you'll realize that I am God!'" (The Message)

Hidden in the heart of God is an overwhelming compassion to rescue and redeem his people. Every parent and child knows this longing to help the ones we love. While God cannot and does not take away our suffering, nevertheless, God enters into it and helps us find a way through it. We walk one step at a time, one day at a time, trusting that God is with us. For Ezekiel and God's people their deliverance became a second Exodus. The vision and promise stirred the smoldering embers of faith into a red hot fire. While we do not understand life's endings or disappointments, it is in the midst of the darkness that we hear the sounds of bones rattling. We catch our breath or maybe a second breath is given to us. It is the first hint of resurrection and how God breathes new life into our weary bones. Stones have to be rolled back, barriers removed, in order for us to emerge and live. We can never go back to what was, but we can always go forward to what is and is yet to be.

Remember 9/11 and the first reactions: How could God allow this to happen? Remember how some people began to say that the tragedy was God's punishment for our life styles? Then, a day or two later, people began

to see something different. God, they said, had been in the towers with the people who had died. God had been in the policemen, firemen, and others who sought to rescue and help. God was in the rubble, not defeated, but together with us in suffering. This is a God who suffers us and suffers with us. God never gives up on his people or the dream of how we can live together under God's gentle rule of mercy and justice. God was coming to help the victims through the volunteers and the outpouring of love. Life did go on, albeit differently. Lives that were lost were not restored, at least not to this world, but they were redeemed and raised to a new life. Those who had lost loved ones in this act of terror found a way to go on. They experienced God saying, "I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you will come to life. ... You will come alive and you'll realize that I am God!" These are the signs of God's vindication and new life emerging from loss. This is the hope that lies at the heart of our faith and the promise that sustains God's people in the dark moments of life. This is the promise we hold tightly when God seems absent. We wait in hope, knowing that God is coming to rescue us.