

5 Lent, Year A

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

It is good to be back here at St. Anne's, Tifton. Some of y'all are old enough
To remember that I used to go here, used to be Acolyte Master here.
But as I just turned 50 this month, that was a while ago.
For those of you who weren't here way back when,
Well, now you know that I used to go here.

Now, what y'all may or may not know,
Is that I am an alcoholic, a sober one, but still an alcoholic.

I actually blame that on y'all – did you know that?
When I first got here,
My dad and I got invited to the Men's Club meeting,
Which was described to us as,

“The only bastard organization of St. Anne's. We don't do anything for the Church.
We just get together once a month to eat BBQ, drink beer, and tell lies.”

I'm kidding – not about the invitation, that's true – that's exactly what they said,
I meant about blaming y'all. My being a drunk is nobody's fault but my own.
If I want to stay sober, I have to be clear about that,
Clear bout the fact that nearly all of my problems are solely
Of my own making.

As we like to say, “I start each day by looking at my enemy in the face,
And then I shave him.”

So, I'm here today to talk to you, both as a preacher and as a recovering alcoholic,
As someone who feels a certain kinship with Lazarus in today's Gospel reading,
Someone who knows what it is to find himself in the dust of the grave,
And then, miraculously, to hear the voice of Jesus, calling,
“Kevin, come out! Unbind him, and let him go.”

But surprisingly, today the preacher in me is pulled not to the story of Mary,
And Martha and Lazarus at the tomb in Bethany,
But rather 600 years earlier to Babylon,
And to the prophet Ezekiel.

Now a word or two about today and about prophecy,
Because that's what this sermon is really about.
See the thing about prophecy is,

No one ever prophesies inside their own head.
Prophecy is necessarily spoken aloud, to others,
And it almost always makes folks uncomfortable.

So if, today, you're feeling a little uncomfortable with this,
And you're wondering "Why are we talking about this here, out loud?"

Just remember, we're not just talking,
We're talking about prophecy,
And if we're not careful, well,
We might end up doing a little prophesying ourselves.

But back to Babylon,
Where the prophet Ezekiel finds himself in the midst of a valley,
Surrounded by piles of bones,
Bodies that have been dead far longer than four days,
Bones bleached very dry by the hot desert sun.

It's not the most uplifting beginnings of a prophetic vision, is it?

But that's okay - Ezekiel's used to that sort of thing by now.
His life has not been easy.

He was born in Jerusalem and carried away in the First Babylonian captivity.
He was a prophet to the Jewish people in Babylon,
Most of whom thought God had abandoned them anyway,
So what was the point of keeping the Torah now?
Could it be any worse?

Yes, much, much worse, he told them. What happened to us,
Will happen to the rest of the country, to Jerusalem, and even to the Temple itself.
They didn't like that, and they didn't believe him,
Until God gave him a vision of it happening at the very moment it happened.
Ezekiel watched in his vision as the Temple was destroyed,
At the exact moment those stones came crashing down.

Soon after, When all their countrymen joined those early captives in Babylon,
And told them that what Ezekiel had prophesied was true,
They started to listen to him at last.

That's how it usually goes with us alcoholics, too- we won't listen to the warnings,
To our loved ones, pleading with us, fussing at us, crying over us.

What do they know anyway? They don't understand,
They don't know what it's like to be me,
They don't have any idea.

I'm fine, just leave me alone.

If you don't know, it's brutal to love or to live with an alcoholic.

The damage we do to those around us is unspeakable.

The shame that comes with facing that reality is equally unspeakable,

And the fear of facing that shame is part of what keeps us in bondage,

Held captive in our own kind of Babylon.

But until the stones of our own temples start crashing down around us,

That's how it will stay. We won't listen; we won't be told; and we sure won't change.

We'll want to; and we promise that we will, that it won't happen again,

That next time will be better,

And we mean it, honestly. Every single time.

Until we're surrounded by the wreckage of our lives,

When we can't keep going, but we can't stop, either.

And then, when the moment comes,

That moment when we do, at last realize that we need help,

We find we've probably pushed away just about everybody we might turn to,

We have no idea where or to whom to go,

And that's when we need someone who can show us the truth.

We need a prophet for us.

Good old Ezekiel may just be the perfect prophet in that moment,

He's seen enough destruction and devastation that it doesn't frighten him any more,

So when the Lord God drops him down in a valley of skeletons,

Surrounded by piles of bones, he ain't scared.

He stands there, staunch and wild,

He doesn't blink or waver.

Prophesy to these bones, says the Lord God, command them to come together!

And Ezekiel does.

Prophesy to the breath, prophesy!

Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live!

And Ezekiel does.

Can you imagine it? Standing in that valley in the desert,

To hear that awful rattling and see the bones draw together,

To watch tendon and ligament, and muscle, and nerve, and skin,

Wrap around those bleached bones and make bodies again.

And then, the wind, swirling from all directions,

Tearing down between the hills that form that valley,

Whipping Ezekiel's hair and beard and robe all around him,

To hear that great gasping as thousand upon thousand lifeless bodies
Draw their first ragged, raspy breath all at once.

Did they jump to their feet all at once, do you think?
Or did they stagger, leaning on and pulling at one another,
In wonder to find themselves suddenly alive and quickened once more?

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.

And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves,
and bring you up from your graves, O my people.
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 have acted.

Trust me when I tell you,
That's very much what it was like for me,
Getting sober.

But unlike Ezekiel, I was terrified,
More frightened than I ever had been about anything,
When I found myself lying in the dust,
Not in a valley in a desert,
But in a swamp in southern Louisiana.
Lying dead for far longer than just four days.
And I needed someone to call me back to life,
To call the breath back into my body.
I needed a prophet.

I may not have had the wild figure of Ezekiel,
But I did have Christine, my amazing wife,
Whose love, fierce and unyielding, was then and is still,
The most convincing evidence I've found of God's love for me.
And I had Patrick and Drew –
the only two of my colleagues who didn't run away from
me like I what I had was catching,

And I had John, my first sponsor,
Who defended me like a mama grizzly does her cub,
And I had Denis and Adam and Bill – my fishing buddies who had preceded me
into recovery,
And who showed me how to find what they had.

And I had Alex, who gave me a job.

And then, I had Frank and Scott – I believe y'all know who they are,
And I had Lonnie, my old, old friend Lonnie,
Who somehow managed to convince Frank, and Scott, and the good people at St.
Michael's,
To risk calling a newly sobered up drunk to be their priest.

And at the words of these prophets,
These dry bones drew up together again,
And the winds blew the breath of God into this body,
And the Lord God brought me up from my grave,
And put his spirit within me, and set me back upon MY soil,

And I KNOW that the Lord God has acted.
That is what recovery is like.
To know that I was lost and had been found,
That I was dead and now, I live.

But, only when I admitted that I was powerless, that my life had become unmanageable,
When I came to believe in a power greater than myself,
That could and would restore me to sanity,
And when I made a decision to turn my will and my life,
Over to the Power of God,
The almighty God, who alone can bring into order the unruly wills and
affections of sinners and of drunks.

I know these things to be true,
Because those people who loved me,
Stood by me,
They didn't flee from or forget me,
They didn't look down and just see dead and dry bones,
And think, "Well, this was his own doing.
He just got what he deserved."

No, they stood by me and with me, and they did not stand silently,
But not everyone is as lucky or blessed or whatever you want to call it,
As I was.

That is why my friend Tommy and I started
Episcopal Recovery Ministries in Georgia,
That is why we're talking about this here today,
On this Recovery Sunday,

Because we are still standing in a valley,
With bones all around us.
Alcoholism affects so many of us,

Far more than most realize.

It's hard to know for sure,
Because despite its prevalence,
Despite the scope and reach of its wanton destruction,
It's still something that most of the time,
we are too scared and ashamed of,
To talk about out loud in the light.
It makes us uncomfortable.

We're embarrassed and terrified,
Desperate for help and yet desperately afraid,
That someone will find out,
And then maybe they, too, will run away from us,
Like what we have is catching.

And you know what? I hope it is catching. I hope it is,
Because what we have is a solution,
Not a cure, but a solution.

What we have is hope,
Not certainty, but hope.

What we have is resurrection. And I hope to God that it's catching.

For the first year that I went to meetings,
I told the people in those meetings, "You know, you people saved my life."
When I got to a year, I realized that wasn't true.
They hadn't *saved* my life, because they didn't just give me my old life back.
Instead, they gave me a new life, a new heart, a new spirit.
Resurrection, not just resuscitation.

But there are still bones in this valley, bones yearning to live again,
Bones that need to hear the prophecy of the Lord God,
Not whispered in the basements of churches by anonymous people,
But shouted aloud in the daylight, by a whole army of Ezekiels,
Modern day prophets who have a Word from the Lord,
And who will not be silent.

People ask me all the time, What can we do for our – fill in the blank –
Husband, daughter, brother, wife, father –
We're sure they have a problem.
We can't take it any more,
But we don't know what to do; we've tried everything.

Those conversations break my heart, every time,

Because really, there's nothing you can do,
Not until their own Temple stones come crashing down around them.
Until they find themselves at the bottom of a pile of bones in a valley.

There are steps you can take for YOU –
You can stop helping them, stop enabling them,
Stop giving them money, stop giving them another chance,
Stop making excuses for their bad behavior,
And for the love of God –

Stop thinking that any of it is your fault or your problem to fix. It isn't.
Your problem is you. Work on fixing you, or
Work on letting God fix you. There are places to go,
There are resources available,
You just have to be brave enough to try.

And that's where WE come into play,
Because while we can't do anything about dear old whoever,
Who is still drinking, still using, still gambling,

We can do something for their families who suffer the brunt of the consequences,
And we can do something for those folks who have realized their own powerlessness,
And who are trying to take steps.

We can love and support and understand them,
Not run away from, or ignore, or shame them.
We can stand next to them as they cautiously pick themselves up out of the dust,
And struggle to stand again.

We can make a safe place here,
For these folks to gather and tell their stories,
To share their experience, strength, and hope with one another,

That they may solve their common problem,
And help others find sobriety and healing, too.

So, we're here not just to talk but to Prophecy –

Prophecy and do not be silent.
Prophecy to these bones around us,
And command them to come together,.
Prophecy to the breath!
Come from the four winds and breathe upon these slain,
And upon us, too, that at last, we all may live!