

“Can These Bones Live?”

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United Church of Strafford, Vermont

March 26, 2023, Fifth Sunday in Lent

Psalms 130; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8; John 11

Welcome: Welcome to the United Church of Strafford, Vermont, on this Fifth Sunday in Lent. Welcome to those of you in the sanctuary and those online. We acknowledge that we are on the ancestral and unceded land of the traditional caretakers, the Western Abenaki [AB-eh-NAH-kee or waw-BAN-a-KEE] people. Our congregation has voted to establish a reparations fund for the hardships they have had to endure from colonial times unto this day. We give thanks for the opportunity to share in the bounty of this place and to protect it in the spirit of indigenous wisdom.

If I were to ask you what is the most important thing we do here, if you had listened to enough of my children’s times you would probably respond—pray! But we would not be here to pray if we did not do something else first.

In fact, everything we do depends on this one thing: being here for one another with loving care and support, walking together through all the wildernesses or dark night struggles or joys of new life and light, sharing our truth and letting others know they are safe to share theirs—a church that does these things will also pray and sing and reflect together and rise to do much more in the community and world.

So please linger after the service again today to make all the other blessings of this church possible simply by extending loving care to all, both in person and on Zoom.

Call to Worship: Two wilderness journeys serve as metaphors for Lent: the forty days Jesus spent being tempted and tried and the forty years Moses and the children of Israel wandered lost. A Lenten hymn begins:

The wilderness is dark tonight,
No path ahead, no star above,
No distant window throwing light
To guide me home to hope and love.

The Spirit’s dove first drove me here.

It left me then, alone and lost
In desert wastes of thirst and fear,
A land faith tells me must be crossed.

God drove Moses into the wilderness with a vision of the Promised Land, and the Spirit's dove drove Jesus, but once there the children of Israel wanted to give up and go back to slavery and Jesus was tempted to take the easy way out. Spiritual wisdom says that we cannot undergo the needed transition to reach a new and better way of being without accepting the struggle the wilderness demands. The hymn goes on:

The Spirit asks I leave behind
The comforts I have craved and known,
It asks that I renew my mind,
A birth like death, my prayer, a groan.

A wilderness of stone and dust
Can tempt the strongest faith to doubt.
It strips my soul to one last trust:
God led me here, God will lead out.

Jesus came out of the wilderness calling us to undergo metanoia, meaning to be reborn into a new spiritual consciousness. Like any birth, it takes dying to our old ways, letting go of everything, turning our wills and our lives over in trust to the Spirit.

The hymn ends,

O God of Moses, God of Christ,
I turn to you to find my way.
I offer all they sacrificed,
Your will the one will I obey.

For you, the smallest step I take,
For you, each work of word or hand,
And then night lifts, light comes, I wake
To find this is the Promised Land.

If we enter each moment with the intention that our words and actions will be Spirit led and serve God's realm of compassion, justice and love, then we arrive in each moment to find the Promised Land. Our wilderness is transformed, one step at a time.

Let us worship together in that faith.

Children’s Time: Good morning! One of my favorite stories is about a monastery that was famous for its holiness and for the beauty of its gardens and cloistered walks on a peaceful mountainside, but the monastery had fallen on hard times. They were down to the last six old monks. They knew that unless there was a miracle, the monastery would die.

A hermit lived in the woods not far away who had a reputation for being wise, so the brothers and their Abbot decided to ask his advice before they gave up. The Abbot and hermit were about the same age, and had much to talk over about the world and spiritual life, but the hermit had no wisdom to offer to save the monastery. Finally, as the Abbot was leaving, he asked, “Are you sure you have no advice?”

The hermit said, “There is only one thing I can say. The Messiah is among you.”

The Abbot did not believe this or see how it was useful, but he shared it with the other monks. Like the Abbot, nobody found hope in what the Hermit said, and they resigned themselves to the death of their order.

But the thought stuck in their minds, and they wondered, could it be true? They started looking at the others for evidence of the Messiah. The Abbot was so wise and kind, it could be him. Brother Louis was a contemplative master, full of the Spirit, it could be him. Another was a teacher, another a compassionate healer, another a champion for justice, and as they saw a possible Messiah in each, they started treating one another with more love and respect.

The monastery still had many visitors a year, and some were young men. They saw the reverence the monks had for one another, and they thought, these men must be really holy, and they listened and watched and found themselves drawn to their spiritual ways. Some joined as novices, and then more did, and before long, the monastery was flourishing again...

We may not know a wise hermit, but there is something we can always do that opens our hearts to see more holiness around us and love more deeply and find new life in the midst of death... Pray!

Let us say together the Lord’s Prayer...

“Can These Bones Live?”

“Can these bones live?” Sickness or chronic pain or exhaustion can make us ask that question, or the deepest grief after a death or despair after a loss or injury.

“Can These Bones Live?”

“Can these bones live?” Environmental crises and war and economic inequity and violence against people because of who they naturally are and too many other problems can make us ask it of the earth or of humanity.

“Can these bones live?”

Ezekiel was not the first to ask it, I suspect—just the most famous. He was both a leader in the religious and social establishment and a scathing critic of it. Ezekiel looked back over the history of the children of Israel in the Promised Land and saw a nation that had strayed from its sacred ideals. They had let materialism and greed, power and wealth be what they served for hundreds of years and not the God of compassion, justice and love that had led them through the wilderness.

Ezekiel prophesied that their ways would lead to disaster, and he saw his prophecy fulfilled when he and the people were carried off in captivity to Babylon, leaving behind a destroyed Promised Land.

Ezekiel did not see this tragedy as causing the death of Israel. It already was a valley of dry bones. Rather, he saw that through their suffering could come redemption and resurrection. He saw that those bones could live if they turned away from their violent greed and selfishness and let the Spirit of God rule their hearts at last.

We know full well what behaviors are in keeping with that Spirit and what rules lead to harmony, fairness and a thriving community. We teach them to our children in preschool and kindergarten, but then we allow and even encourage corporations and governments to live by the opposite: selfishness, oppression and violence.

One result of our straying from the sacred way is that we are destroying the earth’s health and the delicate balance of nature on which our lives depend. Another result is militarism and war at the expense of people dislocated as refugees and lives destroyed and schools and healthcare and other systems of support underfunded.

On the other hand, the Golden Rule, compassion for the vulnerable and the love of neighbor as our self would create exactly the opposite: planetary stability, harmony and balance with nature, social and economic sustainability and sufficiency for all, and the kind of systems of nurture and care that the best of parents create for their children.

“Can these bones live?” Our neighbor, William Sloane Coffin wrote, “Hope is a state of mind independent of the state of the world.” Remember that Ezekiel was looking at a wasteland without any sign of life that he could see, and yet God asked him to hope.

Bill said, “If your heart’s full of hope, you can be persistent when you can’t be optimistic. You can keep the faith despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. So while I’m not optimistic, I’m always very hopeful.”

Hoping, keeping the faith despite the evidence, is the only chance we have of changing something that looks hopeless.

“Can these bones live?” We need to keep hoping that humanity will undergo a transformation in its wilderness, that we will emerge from it as Jesus did with a new heart and mind that will finally follow and fulfill the wisdom that humanity has preached to itself for at least three thousand years, that we will live in harmony with one another and with the earth and with the creator of the universe whose sacred ways cannot be violated without the consequences we are seeing today.

I am not optimistic, but I am very hopeful, not just because we are running out of time and now must by necessity make this change, but also because such a transformation has happened before.

Bishop Desmond Tutu said that it was great suffering that transformed Nelson Mandela—great suffering combined with great love.

The same could be said of Horatio G. Spafford. As you may recall, Spafford’s wife and four young daughters were in a shipwreck in the middle of the North Atlantic Ocean in November of 1873.

His wife, Anna, was found floating unconscious on a plank of wood, but their four daughters, aged two to eleven, were lost.

As soon as he heard, Spafford left to be with his wife, utterly devastated by the grief. The captain of his ship called him to his cabin one night to say they were passing over the place where his daughters had died. A feeling welled up in Spafford, a certainty that his daughters were not three miles down in the cold dark. He had a vision of them surrounded by the warmest love and light, and that hope changed him. He wrote this hymn before he reached land.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll,

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Horatio and Anna went on to dedicate their lives to a healing ministry in Jerusalem that brought together Christians and Muslims and Jews, in a spirit of oneness and love born out of suffering.

Our Upper Valley neighbor Russ Keat was in Haiti as a disaster relief worker in the first days after the earthquake in 2010. Relief workers felt overwhelmed, hopeless and exhausted by the magnitude of devastation and suffering. Keat was lying outside one night in a valley surrounded by densely settled hills, unable to sleep. He could feel the Haitian's fear, grief and despair filling the valley.

At one in the morning, out of a home above him, a voice sang out. It was a song he knew but could not place at first. Then other voices began to sing. Soon a whole neighborhood was singing. And then from the other side of the valley, another neighborhood joined in, and another, and then he recognized the song.

It was Horatio G. Spafford's hymn,
When peace like a river...
It is well with my soul...

Before long the entire valley was singing, thousands of voices flowing into the night like a river of hope that it would be well, that it truly was well with their souls.

Humans have a tremendous capacity for resilience, transforming suffering love into wisdom and well-being. We have seen that resilience after natural disasters, and in nations destroyed by war, and in the tragedies and losses suffered by people we have known.

"Can these bones live?"

Let us live and work in that hope, and let us pray in silence that it may be so...

Haiku by Mel Goertz:

The sight of a bard owl
perched on the railing waiting for prey
wakes me up.