

*Texts: Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:21-27*

*Subject: Valley of Bones*

*Theme: Peace Together*

*Second Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021; Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

This season, some of us wait for surprises. Some long for peace and healing along with it. Some enter into this time with joy, others with painful memories. This story of a valley of dry bones becoming re-animated, renewed, and re-membered has it all.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This time last year, as we prepared for online worship in advent, we wondered how long we'd be waiting to be together again. We could not have foreseen another COVID Christmas. While we are able to gather this year, we keep the masks on for safety of those more fragile, and while we wait to see what the virus will do next. The prospect of more suffering is not what we had planned or hoped for. We hope and pray we're moving in the right direction, more getting vaccinated, mild symptoms from a new variant, but we just can't see what the future will bring. For now we follow Jeremiah's advice to the people in exile - build homes, grow families, serve neighbors in the city where we live. It's what we can do. And life is happening: we were glad to honor Pastor Charlie Bowker's work with Family Promise this week - that began here more than 25 years ago - grateful that he and Peggy could travel to be with us here in Las Vegas. This weekend, a new baby is born, daughter Quinn born to Allison Windes! We keep her and baby Quinn in prayer as they await a heart surgery in the coming weeks.

This is how we live as God's people. We hold each other in the suffering and rejoice in the celebrations. We long for better times, but take what comes, pray and trust

in the Lord, and hold space for tears, for the ups and downs, and pray for the peace of God in every situation.

Last Sunday we heard from the prophet Jeremiah's letter to the people in exile. Today, Ezekiel shares a vision of the valley of dry bones from inside Babylon, after the destruction of the temple, and the deportation of most of the population of the northern kingdom to Babylon. They were 900 miles away from home, their temple had been destroyed and the future was difficult to imagine. How could they be faithful? Everything they had built was gone. Families were devastated and divided. Their warriors were defeated. They searched for meaning, purpose, and answers.

This is the third vision given to the prophet Ezekiel, a member of a priestly family. Before this he had been whisked away and shown a vision of heaven opened. He then saw a scroll, and spoke a prophecy of judgment. The people had turned away from their God, and unlike Amos, who accused leaders of committing injustice, Ezekiel charges the priests with abominations in the temple. They had gone after other gods, and led the people astray. Now the nation was in ruin, and Ezekiel is brought to a valley, where bones cover the land as far as the eye can see.

These were not just the bones of those killed in battle against the Babylonians, but they've been drying in the valley for a long time. They are the bones of the whole nation - the great family promised to Abraham, the whole nation of Israel laid to waste. The voice of the holy one speaks: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Unlikely. They're dry bones, the birds have picked them clean. Who knows how long they've been there. But the prophet won't answer. The only one who can know is the Lord.

The changes we've faced in the last couple of decades are enough to make us wonder what our future will look like. Everything is changing around us so fast. We see it in political instability, new diseases, changing economic realities, and the decline of the church. We have billionaires going to space, and neighbors being evicted, living in tents on vacant lots. Droughts, fires, floods, and famine are on the horizon. We might look around and despair, cry out to the Lord, and wonder the same things, "What about us? Can *these* bones live again?" The Lord knows. Whenever we have faced trials in this nation, people have come together. This week, another school shooting, uneasiness as the Supreme Court takes up the issue of abortion and reproductive rights. We are isolated. We are dried up. We are so often afraid.

How can we be re-membered? Where can we find peace together?

The Word of God brings us the promise:

*"I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live"*

God will bring life. Even when we are fully dried up and wasting away, worried and wondering about the future, unsure of how to move forward, angry, abused, and drawn away from the path we thought we were on - life is possible, hope is available, peace comes from the life-breathing Word of God.

We can't see the future. But we know God's plans are good. We know God longs for justice, calls us to be faithful, and gives us hope. This same God is the one who puts us back together, builds us up after we've been broken down and left to languish in the valleys in our lives. This is who God is. That breath that God breathes into us, turns and

gives GLORY back to the one knits us into one community, who pieces us together. We might not know when or how it will happen, but every week in this place - we proclaim the good news of God who sent us a savior who died and rose again. We say that we believe in resurrection. We are people who live and move in the world because God breathed life into us.

Death and life are tied together. Our laments and celebrations come moment by moment. This is our reality. Even in the midst of storms and the everyday battles we face, we have little moments of peace, and little resurrections. We are pushed down and still we rise. Just as we see the needs in our community of those who are marginalized, whether because of the color of their skin, or sexual orientation, or physical abilities, financial status, or those suffering from mental health issues, homelessness, or addiction - we can know that the Lord will bring peace. The Lord will save us again. "The Lord [has] spoken and will act."

The word for "peace" in Greek, *eirēnē* can mean literally "to tie or join together." When we pronounce two people joined together in marriage, there is peace. When a family welcomes a new child, there is a new peace (just not at bedtime). When a community begins to come together and heal after a tragedy, like in Waukesha, WI, or Oxford, Michigan, or Las Vegas, NV - peace begins. In Hebrew, we hear the word *Shalom*, to mean peace and wholeness - when everything is one.

Can these bones live? God knows. Notice it's not all at once. First the bones come together, then the sinew and flesh. But they need the breath. Without it, they're just bags of bones. Lifeless. Inert. Ineffective. When the breath comes, the bodies really come alive. God breathes life into our dry bones every morning, every moment. That

breath of God fills us and moves us in faith through every lament, every pain, and hardship we suffer.

God's peace is with us in Jesus. Jesus who joins us together through his death and resurrection, is present in our suffering, and pieces us together as a community of faith in this place to hear the life giving Word and sends us to bring peace to our community. In the months to come we'll be moving more and more out into the streets, into the places where the people are to share in life together - at the soccer field, the coffee shops the libraries, the schools and events in this city to share the peace we have and to show the living hope that God has given us in Jesus Christ. This advent we hear the promises again, and receive the breath of God in us that we would be re-animated to live and serve and rise again as the family of faith here.

God's peace is with us, given to us through the breath of the Holy Spirit. That peace binds us to him, and each one of us together in love, for the sake of our neighbors, and for eternity. We are tied together with our Savior - the one who was and is, and is to come. Jesus - our peace.

Amen.