

LISTEN TO WHAT GOD ISN'T SAYING

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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After surviving the worst “perfect storm” in memory, it’s now time to pick up the pieces. In Maryland, particularly here in Baltimore, spared the brunt of Hurricane Sandy, our prayers of thanksgiving are tempered by the ongoing suffering and devastation up in New York and New Jersey.

Seeing whole neighborhoods destroyed by wind, water and fire, it’s hard to imagine, at this moment, how and when life will return to normal. Hurricane Sandy is a blatant reminder that life as we know it, can change suddenly and dramatically.

Twenty-five hundred years ago God raised up Ezekiel to give hope to the struggling exiles living in Babylon. In 586 B.C. the Babylonians conquered Judah and demolished Jerusalem before hauling the Jews to live as captives in Babylon. For the Jews, this was the end of life as they knew it. Their belief system, based on God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants now seemed to be null and void, leaving them with a crisis of faith.

The Promised Land was meant to be theirs’ forever. The City of David, particularly Solomon’s Temple, was supposed to be God’s dwelling place forever. Now it was all gone. Was the faith of their fathers just an illusion, was their God not God?

Seventy years later, towards the end of their exile, Ezekiel spoke to lift the Jews from despair by promising them resurrection and new life.

God gave Ezekiel a vision of dry bones representing the people of Israel and then commanded him,

“Prophesy to these bones (saying) ‘Oh dry bones hear the word of the Lord...I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and cover you with skin, put breath in you and you shall live and know I am the Lord.’” (Ezekiel 37:4-6)

Keep in mind by this time most of the Jews in exile, never having lived in Jerusalem, considered Babylon to be their only home. Though they were captive exiles, they were not exactly prisoners, and were able to slowly accommodate themselves to living and even prospering in Babylon. And yet there was a remnant, a sizeable minority, who kept the faith and eagerly embraced Ezekiel’s Good News.

Then (God) said “...these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold they will say our bones are dried up and our hope is lost...”

“Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘...Thus says the Lord God: ‘Behold I will open your graves and raise you from your graves...and I will bring you home to the land of Israel.’” (Ezekiel 37:11-14)

While there may be no apparent comparison between our challenges today and those endured by the exiles back then, there certainly are parallels, especially when we must contend with our natural disasters as well as the consequences of unwise choices, both political and personal.

First, like them, we may feel like a pile of dry bones with our best days behind us, especially in our present economic situation. We wonder if our children’s inheritance will only be mounting debt and bankruptcy. But just as Ezekiel spoke directly to his generation, his message speaks just as powerfully to our generation, telling us our fears just may be a tad premature, so don’t wheel out the coffin yet. We can still see our problems get turned around. As far as our nation’s future is concerned I’m not minimizing the importance of the outcome of Tuesday’s election any more than Israel’s future was ultimately dependant on the whether wise or foolish decisions made by each king who sat on David’s throne.

The truth is, despite their worst and best efforts as well as our worst and best efforts, ultimately it’s only God who can breath new life into our old dry bones and guarantee our future. What will our future look like? Truth be told, we have to wait and be patient, especially during the hard times. But that doesn’t mean we sit on our hands and do nothing. That would be irresponsible and inexcusable. Yes, wait patiently, but also wait actively, just like that faithful minority of Jews waited actively during their exile for God to make all things right again. Like that faithful remnant who kept the faith and held the fort, we need to learn as a nation and as God’s people how to get in sync with God’s will, while we wait for God. Listen again to what God told Ezekiel to say to the exiles.

“Say to them, ‘thus says the Lord God, I’m going to open your graves... I will put my spirit within you and you shall live. I will place you on your own soil, then you shall know that I, the Lord have spoken...’” (Ezekiel 37:12-14)

The prophets were all meticulous observers of human events, Ezekiel being no exception. Sensing the balance of power in the Middle East shifting away from Babylon, Ezekiel also sensed God working in the weeds to prepare for the end of Israel’s captivity. His hunch was validated when Babylon fell to the Persians, whose policy was to allow all the exiles Babylonia conquered to return to their homelands.

Given the choice to stay or leave, not surprisingly, many Jews chose to stay in Babylon, but as Isaiah promised 70 years earlier, at the beginning of the exile, a remnant did return to Jerusalem, only to find Jerusalem still devastated and the House of David gone underground, never to rule again because for the next 500 years God’s people lived under a succession of foreign masters, first the Persians, next the Greeks and finally the Romans.

The fact that God never promised everything would return as it once was had to be a bitter pill for the Jews to swallow. After they returned to Jerusalem, a shell of its

former self, they sadly concluded Israel's glory days would be over until the Messiah, God's Anointed One would finally appear and set things right. Until then, they could only wait.

Unfortunately as they waited they went into survival mode. Forgetting their calling to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth, they turned inward, cutting themselves off from the world in order to demonstrate they were still God's holy people, meant to keep themselves separate and unique from the Gentiles. To accomplish this goal, the religious establishment imposed those ever stricter rituals and codes of conduct, mistakenly believing the Messiah would only come when all of Israel embraced and practiced the Law of Moses. In other words, they convinced themselves only their good works could make them worthy enough before God.

Having reviewed Ezekiel's prophecies and how the Jews received them, what new and important lessons can we draw from all this? I think the key lesson is really all about how we either listen carefully or not listen carefully when the Scriptures speak. Take Ezekiel's prophesy,

“Oh dry bones, hear the word of the Lord I will cause breath to enter you... I will lay sinews on you and cover you with skin... I am going to open your graves... I will put my spirit within you...you shall live on your own soil...then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.”

Listen carefully to what God is saying here, but also listen carefully to what God isn't saying.

First, listen to what God is saying to the exiles in Babylon, “Despite evidence to the contrary, I'm still here with you and our covenant is still in force. In other words, I'm not done with you yet. Your time of exile is almost over. I will restore you to the Promised Land. I am still your God, you are still my people. I'm keeping my promise to your ancestor Abraham, whose descendants will be more numerous than all the stars in the heavens. The time is near when you will again become a light and blessing to all the nations of the earth because, through you, I will bring all people unto myself.”

Now listen carefully to what God isn't saying to the exiles in Babylon. “I'm not promising your homecoming will be easy and glorious, so don't put words in my mouth and then take them out of context. Let me be clear, I never promised you a national revival with Jerusalem becoming the capital of the world. I expect you to be a holy people, but that doesn't mean you isolate yourselves from the Gentiles and then look down on them. I never said to keep the Law of Moses to prove yourselves but to remind yourselves, I am your God and you are my people, chosen not for your glory, but for my glory, by being my servants to all humanity.”

Maybe now you can see how carefully listening to what God is saying and also listening carefully to what God isn't saying can determine whether or not nations and individuals go off the rails.

In just a few minutes we'll remember what Jesus said and didn't say the night before we crucified him. "This is my body broken for you, "This is my blood, shed for you, "Take and eat, take and drink. Remember me."

Before expecting what he should do for us, we should first remember what Jesus already did for us. After remembering his suffering and dying for us maybe we should be asking ourselves, and each other, what should we be doing for Jesus and his kingdom?

For the past five years, every Sunday my charge and benediction has come from Gene Peterson's translation of Mark 10:6-8. After watching Jesus preach and heal it was now the twelve disciples turn to go and do likewise. Before sending them out Jesus charged them:

"Go out to the lost, confused people in your neighborhood. Tell them God's Kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out demons. And don't worry about what to say and how to say it, the Spirit of my Father will supply the words." (Mark 10:6-8)

God's covenant with us through Christ compels us to get involved in people's lives.

"Bring health to the sick." Be a consistent healing presence to those who are broken physically, emotionally, spiritually.

"Raise the dead" nurture Christ's risen presence in yourself so you can bring renewal to people whose hopes and dreams are dying.

"Touch the untouchables." Befriend and serve especially those you'd normally ignore, because now Christ's love demands you do otherwise.

"Kick out demons." Be ready to stand against any evil manifested in prejudice, greed, violence and oppression.

If it sounds like what any pastor should charge his congregation, if it sounds good, then go do it. Let's come together and recommit ourselves to becoming a Christ-centered faith community whose primary mission is to serve others with the primary goal of bringing Christ to people.

If you carefully listen to what God isn't saying, you'll certainly hear what God is saying. God keeps his promises even when we don't. He takes our dry bones, puts flesh on them and breathes into us new life, not so we can have it all, but so we can give our all, because Christ gave his all for us.

Come to his table; bring your dry bones with you and he will give you life, and you will be charged to bring life and hope where there's death and despair.