

“And They Lived”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me,
and brought me out by the spirit of the LORD
and set me down in the middle of a valley;
it was full of bones.

God led me all around them; there were very many
lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

God said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?”

I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.”

Then God said to me, “Prophecy to these bones,
and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.

Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones:

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;
and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded;

and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling,
and the bones came together, bone to its bone.

I looked, and there were sinews on them,
and flesh had come upon them,
and skin had covered them;
but there was no breath in them.

Then God said to me,

“Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal,
and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD:
Come from the four winds, O breath,
and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

I prophesied as God commanded me,
and the breath came into them, and they lived,
and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then God said to me,

“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.
They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely.’

Therefore prophecy, and say to them,
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 will act,”
says the LORD.

And They Lived

Ezekiel 37:1-14

March 26, 2023

Rev. Michael P. Catanzaro

I.

Today we celebrate the 20th anniversary of our congregation's annual All-Church Read; which, to me, is an amazing milestone. Joining past books, A Gift From The Sea, Holes, Tuck Everlasting, Because of Winn-Dixie, Facing The Lion, A Wrinkle In Time, The Last Lecture, The Little Prince, To Kill A Mocking Bird, Jonathan Livingston Seagull, All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten, Dog Song, The Alchemist, A Monster Calls, The Miraculous Journey Of Edward Tulane, The Hundred Dresses, Winnie The Pooh, Where The Wild Things Are, and Clementine are this year's selections Ordinary Mary's Extraordinary Deed, by Emily Pearson, and Foster, written by short story, Irish, author Claire Keegan.

Given the widening age range and growing number of kids in our church, this is the first year we've actually selected *two* books; with each kid or family receiving an age appropriate book as a gift from the church.

II.

There was a lot happening in the world and in our nation back in 2003 when we first began this tradition; tragic things, amazing things and, of course, a great many very ordinary things as well: the U.S. invaded Iraq in large part due to suspected Weapons of Mass Destruction, we watched in shock and disbelief as the space shuttle Columbia exploded soon after lift-off killing all 7 astronauts on board, action movie star and former bodybuilder Arnold Schwarzenegger was elected Governor of the state of California, Tampa Bay won the Super Bowl (no Brady), the Marlins defeated the Yankees in the World Series, and the University of Syracuse won the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship. The cost of a first class stamp was 37 cents, and gasoline was \$1.60 a gallon. Meanwhile, over next-door at the manse, a much younger Linda Potter was nursing a 1 year old while tending to a 3 year old and sending a 9 year old off to the 4th grade.

III.

In the midst of all that, a group of women from our church started gathering to form a Book Group, with one of the first books they read being A Gift From The Sea, by Anne Morrow Lindbergh. Never one to be short on good ideas (especially those that make more work for her husband) Linda suggested we invite the entire congregation to read the book as well and that, perhaps, I could preach a sermon using the book.

Which is much harder than you would think, and which is why we are here today, 20 years later, with the books Ordinary Mary's Extraordinary Deed and Foster set before us. With the exception of the year we read The Little Prince, it has been a delightful journey to make, and very much in keeping with the Presbyterian penchant for a reasoned faith and a learned ministry. More importantly, though, over the years we have shifted our focus to Young Adult and Children's literature as a consistent and demonstrable means to remember, include and nurture the children who belong to our church family.

IV.

Set in rural Ireland in the early 1980s, the book Foster is very much concerned with the impact of family on a child's development. Though she is never named, the book is narrated by the central character "Ceit" (a Gaelic shortening for Kathleen, meaning "pure") a young girl who is fostered out to another family, the Kinsellas, 'her mother's people', for the summer months. There is constant juxtaposition between her own family and new foster family. The Kinsellas are kind and caring, the epitome of all that is good in foster parents, giving the girl the space to develop and feel valued.

It is a coming-of-age story that illuminates the contrasting lives of the families: one struggling and overcrowded, the other contented but childless; the rural community that they live in and, by extension, Ireland itself. The little girl, no more than seven or eight, arrives at the Kinsellas farm and discovers that for once she is the centre of attention. Also in sharp contrast to her own home, here, 'there is plenty of food and money to spare'.

V.

The girl is uneasy at first but soon grows to feel comfortable in a household where she finds love and affection; something she's never encountered before. Here there is room, and time to think.

The reason she is being temporarily fostered is that her mother is near the delivery of another in a long line of children. She is not told how long she will stay there. Over the course of what, in effect, was her summer holidays from school, this charming, precocious, needy child is exposed to a life far different from what she has had at home. Keegan does not always clearly tell what is different; her subtle suggestions are, perhaps, even more potent.

The Kinsella home is supposed to be one where "Petal" (how they refer to Ceit) is assured that there are no secrets, but she does, in a most realistic manner, eventually learn that there is one: that the Kinsella's son had accidentally drowned in a pond on their farm.

VI.

Foster is a story of love and loss, of how grief can be transformed into tenderness, of how hope endures and, with it, kindness. It is, at times, almost unbearably poignant in evoking childhood innocence and adult stoicism. According to the author, Foster is "an examination of home and an examination of neglect. Families can be awful places, just as they can be glorious and loving. To a child, for instance, the difference between being able to be well-fed when you are growing, and not, is enormous."

Though it certainly was not planned this way, it turns out that Foster is the perfect book for our 20th anniversary, as it very much speaks to the larger reasons we began this endeavor two decades ago, and explains why we have enthusiastically and steadfastly continued this tradition. Simply put, children thrive in an environment where they are nurtured, loved and given the space and time to both explore the world and discover themselves. Just as this is true with regard to every chronological child, it is equally the case for any child of God no matter their age.

VII.

A few weeks back during a Children's sermon, though I cannot remember exactly when as time flies while you're having fun, I explained to the kids that there is nothing from which they cannot bounce back even though it may seem and feel to them to be the end of the world. Such a lesson is one which we, as a church, need to be constantly reinforcing; not only with the children in our midst, but with our own selves as well.

Today's scripture reading from Ezekiel 37 is, perhaps, the most vivid story of the potential for and promise of redemption to be found in all the Bible; second only to the events of that first Easter Sunday morning as Christ is resurrected from the dead. Here we find the prophet Ezekiel being led by the hand of the LORD and brought out by the spirit of the Lord to a valley full of bones; there were very many, and they were very dry.

VIII.

There, standing in that valley, God asked Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Bones which represent the whole house of Israel which laments that their bones are dried up and their hope is lost; that they are cut off completely.' And Ezekiel answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."

Then, Ezekiel prophesied as God commanded; and as he prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. Ezekiel looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then God said to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

IX.

Ezekiel prophesied as God commanded, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. And God commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to them, and say to them, "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. 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 will act," says the LORD.

A week from today is Palm Sunday and the start of Holy Week; the occasion in the ecclesiastical year when we focus most directly on the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ, and the redemption won for the world in his salvific act of dying on the cross. Yet, it always seems to me to be the case that this seminal notion of redemption, which is so central and critical to our faith, remains frustratingly esoteric, ethereal and greatly removed from our everyday lives.

X.

It is as if our gaze gets fixed on the empty tomb. We see the stone rolled away, the linen wrappings lying in heaps on the ground and, perhaps, even discern the words of an angel telling us the one we seek is not here but has been raised from the dead. And, so, we stop once a year at Easter to stare into that empty tomb with gratefulness and humility, and use this understanding to inform our life and our faith. Unfortunately, though, we often fail to follow where the story leads and, in so doing, miss the experience of discovering, for ourselves, the risen Christ on the road we walk each day through this world; an experience which has the power not just to *inform*, but to *transform* our lives and our faith.

Using, as metaphor, the story found in Foster, it is as if we miss the opportunity to be welcomed into a place where hope and tenderness might be found; a home where nurture and love abound. It may not change the circumstances of our life, but it certainly holds the power to change how we live *through* those circumstances.

XI.

I began today's sermon by sharing how the tradition of the All-Church Read arose here on the Park. Beyond the importance of having a fuller understanding of the endeavor, I offer it as but one example of how, over the past two decades, a great many bones, some very dry, have rattled and come together here at our church; bone to its bone. How sinews and flesh came upon them, and skin covered them. And, how breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a not quite yet vast, but certainly growing multitude.

Like Ezekiel in that valley, we here on the Park bear witness to the risen Christ putting spirit within us, giving us life and a place of our own where we might stand on our feet; a place we gladly share with, and bid welcome to, any who might come and know that the Lord has spoken and will act. A place where redemption is not just found but, moreover, experienced as well.

XII.

Here in this church there is room, and time to think. Here in this church we learn to love one another, and to help to bear each other's losses. Here, grief is transformed into tenderness, hope endures and, with it, kindness toward each other and, hopefully, even toward ourselves. Here, we foster an environment where every child of God, young and old, might be nurtured to grow and flourish regardless of the circumstances of our life. Here is a place where ordinary people do extraordinary deeds. Here, redemption is real. We believe, and have witnessed, that there is nothing from which we cannot bounce back; even though it may seem and feel to us as if our world might come to an end.

XIII.

Speaking of coming to an end, I would like to close today with a few passages gleaned from Claire Keegan's book, Foster. Consider them as gifts offered both as enticement to read the book if you have not already done so, and as guides along the road of the journey of faith we share.

Where there's a secret, there's shame and shame is something we can do without. (Pg. 18)

I want to say I am afraid but am too afraid to say so. (Pg. 25)

You don't ever have to say anything. Many's a person who has lost much just because they missed the perfect opportunity to say nothing. (Pg. 64)

Maybe the way back will somehow make sense of the coming. (Pg. 65)

And that is when he puts his arms around me and gathers me into them as though I were his own. (Pg. 67)

Amen.