

Sermons at Christ Church

A rise, for the task is yours, take courage and do it.

Lent V

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Heal us, O God. Touch us, O God. Renew us, O God. Sustain us, O God. Fill us with hope, and your life-giving spirit. Amen.

Mortal, can these bones live? You may also be asking yourself a similar question in the face of COVID-19. You see the numbers inch up and up, and you ask, can we survive this pandemic? The prophet Ezekiel is carried in a vision into a valley full of dry bones. And in that vision, God will ask him, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Notice that God refers to Ezekiel as mortal, for that’s the unique quality the prophet shares with all the dry bones that populate the valley.

The prophet looks across the valley and all he sees is helplessness, hopelessness and death. Mortal, can these bones live? The prophet doesn’t pretend to have an answer to the question, rather, he defers the responsibility of human hope, renewal, mending, healing, restoration and life itself solely to God. ‘Lord God, you know.’ He says. He was aware that this has been the story of God all along, God’s story-it is a story of renewal, mending, healing and restoration of life itself so that broken bones may rejoice in God’s healing mercy and grace.

Mortal, can these bones live? Yes, they can. For so believed the psalmist who cried out to the God who mend broken bones. The psalmist wonders “If you, Lord, were to note what is done amiss, O, Lord, who will survive?” Who can survive? Armed with the knowledge that none can survive if God were to note what is done amiss, the psalmist doesn’t crucify himself over his sins or that of others. Not that those sins are unimportant, but the question is, what are they in relation to the mercies and grace of God? See, God’s justice is not in competition with His mercy; both (justice and mercy) are manifestations of his redemptive purpose. And so as hopeless as the human condition may be, the psalmist believes that the broken bones can live.

Mortal, can these bones live? Yes, they can because by the grace of God we are empowered to take a retrospective look at our lives. The path of mercy and grace which the psalmist recognizes as the way to redemption becomes possible when we look at ourselves in relation to God, and conclude, that each turning point in our life become visible only in retrospect, when our eyes are open because we dared to look back. And when those eyes are open, we don't see dry bones, we see possibilities, healing, renewal, and restoration for that is the purpose of God.

When we trace the patterns of our lives we can only tell the story of a God so rich in mercy that we can trust in him to restore to life the broken bones in our lives, our broken relationships, the broken expectations and human hopelessness in the face of this pandemic. The essential question remains, mortal, can these bones live? Yes, they can because we are willing to take a retrospective look at our lives with the hope of building a future devoid of the mistakes of the past.

I never felt as much resonance with the hymn *Amazing Grace* until I toured a former Slave Castle in my native Ghana. This visit wasn't my first, but it felt like my first visit because it was like the Christian story, we have to revisit the story every year to relearn the depth of God's compassion. On this visit we walked into a small cell for captured Slaves who were considered troublemakers. There were three doors leading to this cell which had no ventilation. If all three doors are shut, you can be sure that a condemned Slave had but a few hours to live. That cell was so that you and I who are used to air condition cannot survive in it for thirty (30) minutes.

The reason why *Amazing Grace* resonates with me is because I came to the same place in life like John Newton, the Slave Trader and author. He took a retrospective look at his participation in the dehumanizing Slave Trade. It was through this looking back that he mustered the courage to sing of the joy of being a sinner-that joy of being a sinner. But being a sinner isn't enough because there's life in the bones that populate the valley, there's a redemption story in each broken bone.

Amazing Grace is about the joy of a sinner. For the sinner's joy is not about his/her sin-however many they may be, the sinner's joy is not about the gravity of his/her sin, the sinner's joy is in knowing that his or her sin isn't enough because God's gracious favor is more than enough. The sinner's joy is in knowing the embrace of the Good news of Jesus Christ, the awareness that he/she has been found and released from the burden of sin and that God's prevenient grace is made possible in his or her life in spite of himself or herself. Remember, it is not the man who is lost, but the man who is saved, he it is that can understand that he is a sinner. For the man who is saved knows what it means to look back and count their blessings with joy.

Remember also, the psalmist doesn't impute any merit to the mercy he seeks, the prophet looks at the dry bones scattered all over the valley and is not left hopeless because he is deeply aware that we do not belong to ourselves, we belong to the God who heals, restores and transforms our broken selves, communities, images, bones and hopes into the true image of the divine.

Mortal, can these bones live? Yes, they can. Over the past several weeks we have been bleeding death. Our world is bleeding. Our land is bleeding helplessness, death, fear, uncertainty, job losses, business closings among others. We are bleeding death and treasure. We are bleeding suspicion and fear. Our lives feel like the disconnected dry bones in the valley. We cannot look at ourselves the way we used to because we can never tell who has the virus. We cannot interact with each other like we're used to because we're as sick as Lazarus. We have to stay indoors like Lazarus in the tomb.

I have asked myself over and over again, what if someone had acted sooner? What if someone had thought about the benefits of being proactive? What if? But that seems insufficient. And so we pray for healing for those affected, and we pray for comfort for those who have lost loved ones. We pray for the kind of restorative healing that Mary and Martha sought for their brother Lazarus. Mary and Martha are like you and me, stuck at home and wondering if there will be some good news, if the curve will flatten.

Mary and Martha reached out to their friend Jesus with the hope that he will offer healing to Lazarus. But their belief opened their eyes to see a different kind of a friend, one who could offer life, even to the dead. Ezekiel, Mary, Martha are like you and I, watching TV and feeling the raw brunt of human helplessness in the face of this deadly virus. Where is our friend Jesus? Would he appear before we die? Helplessness. In a sense, Lazarus is like any one of us-sick, broken and lying dead in the tomb of our helplessness, hopelessness and death.

But may we never forget that the God who offers life to the dry bones in the valley, is also the same God who calls Lazarus out of the tomb and offers him a new life, a life which is not futuristic, but now-right here, right now-unbind him and let him go, set him free to sing of God's mercies. This is the kind of healing we're craving for ourselves and others. That the God who offers this kind of healing would restore our fortunes as we battle this deadly virus. We dare not lose hope in this God.

Mortal, can these bones live? Yes, they can. For the glory of God which came alive in the valley and in the graveyard outside Bethany was not about dead men walking, it was about the God who gives new life to the helpless, hopeless and the dead.

For that reason alone, no matter the depth of our desperation, helplessness and sins, my faith is safely and firmly anchored in the God who gives us a reason to sing of His mercy and invites us to walk with him to Calvary and beyond. My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus Christ, and I pray that your hope rests in him also, for this too shall pass. Amen.