**Reflection - The Rev. Herbert Jones**
This morning’s reading from the Hebrew scriptures comes from the prophet Ezekiel and tells the familiar story of the valley of the dry bones. In the story, God takes the prophet by the hand and leads him to a valley, filled with bones, and has Ezekiel prophesy to the bones, telling them what God will do. God is going to reconnect the bones with sinew, and cause flesh to come upon the bones, and skin. Finally, God will breathe God’s breath onto the bones, giving them life.

We don’t have to struggle for long about what the metaphor means; the reading lets us know very clearly. God tells Ezekiel that “these bones are the whole house of Israel.” But a little context may be helpful here.

Ezekiel was active during the time of the Babylonian exile, a time of great turmoil and loss for the Israeli people. In the early 6th century BCE King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon lay siege to the city of Jerusalem and installed a puppet king in Israel. The siege culminated in 588-587 with the sacking of the city, the destruction of the temple that had been built by Solomon centuries before, and the final deportation of much of the Israeli citizens to captivity in Babylon.

These events were devastating to the people of Israel and to the Jewish religion as it was understood at the time. It appeared that God had abandoned them. The ancient covenants had been disrupted. Their religion, so intricately associated with the land, had been thrown into confusion. They felt abandoned by God.

Much of the biblical literature of lament comes from this period. Psalm 137, a psalm of the exile, is particularly poignant:

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|   | By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, \*    when we remembered you, O Zion. |
|   |   |
|   | As for our harps, we hung them up \*    on the trees in the midst of that land. |
|   |   |
|   | For those who led us away captive asked us for a song,and our oppressors called for mirth: \*    "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." |
|   |   |
|   | How shall we sing the LORD'S song \*    upon an alien soil? |
|   |   |
|   | If I forget you, O Jerusalem, \*    let my right hand forget its skill. |
|   |   |
|   | Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouthif I do not remember you, \*    if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. |

This is the context of the story of the dry bones, the bones that God says are the whole house of Israel. Ezekiel, who prophesied the destruction, near the end of his writing also became a prophet of hope, not doom.

We in our world today are not facing anything like the complete destruction of our civilization, as the Israelites did. We have not been sieged by an invading army and our temples have not been destroyed.

But we are facing something the likes of which we have not seen. And I know there must be moments when we feel abandoned on a foreign shore. I don’t know about you, but I miss church! I miss the connections, the community, the gathering together for worship and song and the Lord’s supper. And unfortunately, it looks like it will be a while longer before we will be able to come together physically as a worshiping community. This is our new reality for a while longer yet.

The Babylonian captivity lasted around 60 years. Again, we’re not facing anything like that. But still, we miss each other and I can’t help but feel a little disconnected. We are so fortunate to have built up this community at St. Thomas and that we live in an age of an unprecedented number of ways to communicate. We will be able to keep up our connections with each other.

But, I can’t help but think, that like Israel and the Jewish religion, we will be changed by what we are currently experiencing. We’ll be changed as a church, as a nation, as a world society, as a spiritual people. The question is how will we be changed.

We have a choice in this. I don’t know about you, but in the last couple of weeks my world has gotten smaller, in a good way. For one thing, I watch less news. It’s not because I’m despondent and unable to face the reality of our times. I still keep up; I know what’s going on. It’s just that I have somehow, probably through the grace of God, been able to figure out what’s important, and hearing the same talking heads over and over again is not among what is important. What is important is helping out at the food pantry and figuring out ways for the church to stay in community while continuing to maintain the necessary physical distance that will help us get through this.  And what is of utmost importance is trusting those things that are trustworthy, God, connections, taking care of each other.

And while we discern who and what to trust, we continue our Lenten fast beyond the time for celebrating the resurrection, in full trust that resurrection is upon us nonetheless. There is meat and sinew and the breath of life on the part of the body of Christ that is St. Thomas, and that will continue. We are not dry bones, we are living, breathing, loving flesh.

And we will continue. Be looking for us, this coming week we’ll be preparing for Holy week, the holiest time of the Christian year. I have some wonderful things to share with you. Stay safe and healthy, listen to the health experts, be kind to yourself and each other. We are together in the beauty of holiness…thanks be to God!

Amen.