

“In the Midst of Despair, the Spirit Gives Life”

Based on Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-14 and Romans 8:6-11

Delivered on March 29, 2020 at Absecon Presbyterian Church by Drew Mangione, pastor

Last week, I asked my son Harrison what he wanted for breakfast—eggs or oatmeal. He offered me a counter proposal – how about strawberries, noodles and pepperoni? Now, aside from not wanting him to start his day with noodles and pepperoni, I could have provided each of those, but we had no fresh strawberries. I told him that we only had frozen strawberries. The look of disappointment on his face broke my heart.

My first impulse was to put my coat on, get in the car and head to the grocery store. It was a reminder of how truly privileged we are in our culture, that I could get a request from my son for a fruit that is out of season, go 1,000 feet down the road and buy something grown 1,000 miles away. Except that under the threat of the Coronavirus and COVID-19, the breakfast whims of my 4-year-old were not enough, to get me to risk getting sick or getting someone sick. Besides, in only just about five minutes later, he asked me to make him eggs, as if that was all he had ever wanted.

I think that because of the safety and security, wealth and comfort, we enjoy in this country, it is hard for us as modern people to understand the stories of Israel in exile. It’s typically hard for us to understand what it is to be isolated and distant. They were removed from the world they knew, and forced to adapt quickly, cut off from people they loved, cut off from the culture they knew, cut off from the way they worshipped, and lastly, made to feel like they were also cut off from their God, as any last hope within them was slipping away.

Yet, here we are, in the third week of social distancing because of COVID-19, and now we know it will be at least another two weeks before anything changes, but based on everything we have seen, our time away may be much longer still. I know you may be feeling a little like you are cut off, isolated and distant. I think we all feel removed from the world we knew, forced to adapt. You and I are cut off from people we love, a culture we know, and are even cut off from the way we worship together. I know some of you may feel cut off from God. We feel this way now, after only weeks, and we begin to understand exile.

In the Babylonian exile, somewhere between 1 out of every 5, or 1 out of every 3 people, was taken from the Kingdom of Judah by force, to relocate nearly 1,700 miles away. By biblical accounts, some 20,000 people were taken to Babylon, while the poorest of the poor, the unskilled, the weak, were left behind. The young prophets Ezekiel and Daniel were carried away, but the older prophet Jeremiah was left in Jerusalem. Families were separated, life was interrupted, and everything changed.

Now, let me be clear, right now, what we are going through is not the same. A foreign invader has not ripped you from your home to take you to another land. But, a new virus has invaded your community and forced you to stay home, forced you to hide, because, like the army of Babylon, it has the ability, to literally decimate the population that it comes in contact with. Sadly, in Italy, it has been reported that 1 in 10 infected die. It is a normal reaction for us to be scared, to lament the life that now seems distant, and wonder loudly, how long? How long?

The people of Judah in exile cried out, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost.' They said of their land, families, temple and their God, 'we are cut off completely.' These were God's chosen, that was the identity they claimed for themselves, but now, their confidence and their hope were fading, replaced by fear, replaced by anxiety, replaced by anger, replaced by sadness. Remember that one way that we can pray, is to lament, to cry out to God from our pain and frustration, making our dissatisfaction known.

And even though our circumstances are not identical to those taken into exile by force, nonetheless, I think that this text speaks to us in our circumstances. We are searching for hope in this time of great uncertainty. Every day, I pray that I might see some light at the end of this tunnel. Every day, I look for a sign in the news reports that it will get better. Like Ezekiel, I look at the number of dead reported each day, and like Ezekiel, I say, "Lord, God, you know." Yes, you know all our fears and our doubts. You know the suffering of nearly 1 million infected, with more than 217,000 in the United States. You know the loss of 50,000 loved ones, with 5,000 in the U.S. You know a world in isolation, longing for hope.

I am not a prophet, but the words that God spoke through Ezekiel speak to us now. Without hope, we are nothing more than dry bones, remnants of who we once were. "O dry bones hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath¹—I will cause Spirit 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 breath¹ – put Spirit in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

The common thread between this text from Ezekiel, the Apostle Paul's words to the Romans, and the gospel text from John we didn't read, which was the raising of Lazarus, is that each of these texts talk about revival, resuscitation and new life, while each one is a foretaste of the promise of eternal life. This is a look at the abundant life offered through faith in Jesus, our call to live in the Kingdom now, to live by the Holy Spirit, to begin the new creation that will come on the last day.

To be honest, these are difficult times and I can easily find myself wrapped up in fears. It is difficult to see numbers rising and hear the dreadful stories of overrun hospitals, where those who are sick, be it with coronavirus or anything else that is serious, are left to suffer—and I pray recover—alone, with no one to visit them. My heart breaks for those whose life saving medical treatments, need to be postponed because the virus is a greater threat. I feel like I just need to do something, go somewhere, but that would only make things worse, so, I stay home, I pray, I cry, and I wonder.

One of the things I wonder about, is where am I going to find God in all of this? What possible reason could the all-powerful, all-loving Creator have for this? I wonder positively – Surely God has a plan and we are going to see it soon! I wonder negatively – Can I really trust this God in whom I've put my faith? I know that the Jews who were in exile did the same, for 70 years. This is when they wrote the book of Lamentations, a book of cries out against God, for God's mercy & love. I know these feelings didn't go away after 70 years, for even though they were home again, nothing went back to how it was. They still felt cut off.

Now, I'm unable to explain why I think God operates this way, allowing suffering. I'm envious of those who seem to think, oh, all that stuff makes perfect sense always. The truth be told, I think

everyone has a different idea of how they would BE God, and then, the God revealed in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, never seems to line up perfectly with any one of us. So, as a result, some reject God entirely for not lining up with their view, others make God look like the god they want to have. But for others still, we live in the tension, without relying on certainty, neither the certainty that we are right and know what is best, nor the certainty that our view of God is the one absolute.

Instead, we are left to live by faith alone, searching for the life given through God's Spirit. To have faith is to live in the tension of NOT knowing why God would allow suffering, but trusting that this is the same God who chose to experience life as we know it, coming down from the position of Creator to be part of the groaning creation. For the Christian faith is about this Creator becoming fully a human like us, sharing in what it is to be limited, even limited by death itself, and submitting to the religious elites and the empire of Rome, to let sin and death do its worst – hang Him on a cross, a bloody and painful death of suffocation, as a sign to warn all who might follow Him.

Now, I don't know why God decided to do it this way, but I find it interesting this tool of Rome, then used to deflate rebellion, now breathes life in Jesus's followers by the Holy Spirit, empowering us to serve one Kingdom, and one anointed King, the Lord Jesus. This is the Spirit that brings life and peace to us in God's justice. This is the Spirit that raised dry bones to sustain the Jews in exile, and it is the Spirit that revived Lazarus and resurrected Jesus. In our new reality with coronavirus, the words of Paul in today's readings are very important, because it is important that we set our minds on God's Spirit and not on our flesh.

But in doing so, we must recognize what Paul means by the flesh. This is not some foolish idea of our physical life not being of value to God, because all that matters is being rescued from this world for Heaven. No, Paul's argument here is better seen as against materialism, than it is against the material world. Paul is describing the flesh and the Spirit as two domains of power, one is set on the desires we have as human beings for our own power, and the other is set on the desire of God to empower us by living within us.

If we rightly set our eyes on this truth, then we will still lament lives lost, but rejoice in the sacrifices we make to limit the number of infected. To live by the Spirit is to accept the limits it will take to flatten the curve and reduce the virus and be prepared to do what it takes now to limit the loss of life it might cause. To live by the Spirit is to recognize physical, emotional and economic hardship, and be prepared to continue putting the needs of others first, to do what it takes to restore community after the virus is gone. To live by the Spirit is to trust that no matter how long it takes, God will be with us working to restore all things, both in this life and the new creation yet to come.

Perhaps, I think, and we all think, that if we were God, we would do things differently. But would it be better? Be glad that I am not God and be glad that you are not either. But remember always, that to lament and cry out is a form of prayer, and your prayers of dissatisfaction are heard by your God, the God who loves you enough to come down to you, and share in your suffering with you in Christ and by His Spirit. Because it is the same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead, that gives you life, is living in you. Amen.