

Ezekiel 37:1-14
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“Ordinary Resurrections”

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The youngest independent country in the world today is South Sudan. After 5 decades of Civil war, in 2011 the country received a moment of unity upon its independence; then another civil war began.

Some of you will remember visits to Emanuel Church by an inspiring young seminary student, Rev. Samuel Peni. This congregation was able to assist Rev. Peni to gain an education that has served him well in his work. We also remember horrible stories he shared like of the time his own family home was invaded by soldiers from the “Lord’s Resistance Army,” when he was not home. That night his daughter Natalia awoke suddenly and ran through thistles to hide in the bushes praying she would not be found. His family survived but neighbors were killed and other children were abducted. Nowadays, he is Bishop Samuel Peni, Bishop of the Episcopal church of South Sudan and Sudan’s Nzara Diocese.

On a recent visit to the US, Bishop Peni reported his family has almost all moved to neighboring Uganda, as refugees, while he continues work as the chairman of the justice, peace and reconciliation commission in his diocese. His peace-making work keeps him some 600 miles from his family on a daily basis. But Bishop Peni, an inspiring preacher, leader and peace activist, continues to hold to God’s dream that the moment of unity his country enjoyed in 2011, become a long-term reality.

The people in Ezekiel’s day needed a dream too. Ezekiel’s vision is given for a nation who has lost heart. They were forcibly exiled from their home land to enemy territory in Babylon. They saw their sacred temple destroyed, their holy city plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword and their young killed or dragged off. The world looked like a massive graveyard.

Rev. Karen Georgia Thompson, The United Church of Christ minister for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations asks, “What is there to be done for a people, for any community that loses hope amidst pain and suffering? Where are the words to help the community find their faith after believing themselves to be separated from God for so long?”

We see graveyard-like places in our world today; the refugee crises in Syria and poverty in Haiti, unemployment at Pine Ridge Reservation, and in Appalachia. An ongoing banking crises in Italy, and Southern Asia where climate change is already causing rising sea levels, increasing cyclones, and changing temperature and precipitation patterns adversely. We don’t have to look very hard at our community or world to bring into view a vast landscape scattered with dry, dead bones.

Ezekiel was one of the people carried off in the third raid on Jerusalem. And in this hopeless time the people needed to hear a promise that only God can give. “These bones will live!” This

nation will be built again, from the ground up. From breath, to being, to strength God will enliven the entire assembly.

Ezekiel's vision presents God's promise for all who are suffering in any time and place. It is a story of a different kind of Resurrection.

We heard the story of Jesus raising Lazarus to new life, the individual, supernatural resurrection. One who has died is alive again. Yet, with Ezekiel we have a different picture of resurrection. God tells Ezekiel, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel... I will put my spirit within you and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil. . ."

We call this an ordinary resurrection. By ordinary I do not mean it is insignificant, simply that it happens within the natural course of human life.

Also by ordinary I am not suggesting these resurrections are too small to change our lives. I call them ordinary because they don't defy the laws of nature and science.

Author Jonathan Kozol, a Jewish author, has written a book called, Ordinary Resurrections. He shares some stories of his visits with children in an afterschool program that met at a church in the Bronx, NY. He tells a story of Otto and Elio, two boys who did NOT like each other.

He writes, "One day Otto, Elio, and I were looking at a stained-glass window in the sanctuary, Otto pointed to the image of an angel, "I know someone up there," he said in a whisper. "Who?" said Elio? "My Brother," said Otto. After that he swallowed and looked down at the ground because his eyes were filling with tears. Elio knew about Otto's brother.

Without hesitation Elio reached his hand across the space between them. Otto wept. Softly, Elio dispensed his medication – three pats on the hand was standard, four for truly deep unhappiness. But Otto got 6 gentle, compassionate pats for this really unbearable news we were all dealing with.

Otto had tormented Elio so many times at the center. Once Elio got so angry at Otto's relentless verbal sparring he reached back over his head and punched him in the nose. He got punished good for that one.

But here was Otto losing all the armor of his cleverness, exposed for once as a vulnerable human being, and here Elio was unable to look at someone else's sorrow without wanting to comfort it, even an enemy. The two boys stood together for a moment under the picture of the angel. None of us spoke. Their two hands clenched together tight, said it all."

God finds so many ways to breathe new life into us for the purpose of justice, peace and reconciliation. Friends in Christ, I hope we are stay awake to the ordinary resurrections in our life.

Amen