

**“Resurrection Possibilities”**  
by Ellen Williams Hensle, 3/22/26

Last Sunday evening, Rev. Kari Olson of East Falls Presbyterian Church and I walked out of our shared confirmation class discussing our plans for the coming week. Sneak peek for our confirmands: this week we’re doing a quick-hits timeline of church history I like to call, “Presbyterians: how did we get like this?” I mentioned to Kari that when I taught this lesson at my previous church, there were always adult confirmation sponsors in the room, and they would inevitably come up to me after the class and say, “wow, I really learned a lot – maybe we should do something like this for adults!” Pastor Kari responded that one of our local colleagues has done just that: hosted a confirmation-style class for adults, leading her congregation back to the basics of what we believe as Presbyterian Christians and how that influences our life together. Maybe we’ll try it sometime.

One thing that comes up in every confirmation class I’ve ever taught is the question: if God is good, why do bad things happen? It’s a question we all ask from time to time. If there’s a benevolent higher being ordering our steps and looking out for us, why does tragedy befall those who are faithful to God? The theological term for this question is theodicy; or it’s sometimes referred to as “the problem of pain.”

In the time of Ezekiel, God’s people were facing their own collective tragedy. The northern kingdom of Israel had already been conquered by one empire and the people driven out from their land. The last of God’s people living in the promised land, in Judah, in the south – they were desperately trying to retain their autonomy in the wake of shifting world powers. But they were finally overcome by the Babylonians.

As Ezekiel is writing his prophecies, their temple has been destroyed and their capital city of Jerusalem has been plundered. Their leaders have been put in chains, their soldiers have been put to the sword, and their young people have either been killed or dragged off to a foreign land. God’s people felt as good as dead.

Those ancient people wondered – if God was good, if God had promised to be faithful to the covenant God made with them, that they would be the LORD’s people, and the LORD would be their God – if God was faithful, then why was this happening to them?

In the first half of his book of prophecies, Ezekiel offers an answer to this question. God is not the one who has been unfaithful. No, God has not been unfaithful to the people – the people have been unfaithful to God. They have failed to worship God rightly, they have failed to live morally, they have failed to create a just and equitable society according to God’s laws. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the people and say things like, “Soon now I will pour out my wrath upon you; I will spend my anger against you. I will judge you according to your ways, and punish you for all your abominations.” Ezekiel proclaims that the people have sinned against God, and that their exile from their homeland is God’s way of punishing them for their unfaithfulness.

While this kind of logic is common in the Bible, and while we can sometimes see an easy connection between sins like greed or lust for power and the suffering of ordinary people – while these connections are tempting, we should take care before applying an oversimplified principle of cause and effect when it comes to suffering. A few years back I attended a continuing education seminar on how to care for people experiencing infertility or pregnancy loss. One of the speakers mentioned a book, published not so long ago, in which the author – a woman by the way – recommends that if you’re struggling to have a baby, you should figure out what specific sin you have committed that is causing God to prevent you from bearing a child, so that you can repent and allow God to open your womb.

We know that reality is rarely so simple. For every Ezekiel in the Bible making an easy connection between sin and suffering – for every Ezekiel there is a Job: a righteous man, beloved by God, who suffers for no sin at all. And for every miraculously opened womb celebrated in the Bible, there is the hidden story of one that remained painfully closed.

Ezekiel has been called by God to share some hard news with his people. But then Ezekiel also has one of the most arresting visions of God’s lovingkindness in the Bible, a vision where he is swept up by the Spirit of the Lord and set down in a valley of dry bones. The people to whom the bones once belonged – they’re not sort of dead, they’re very dead. God leads Ezekiel around and around the bones, around and around to survey them – Ezekiel finds that they are completely dry. No remaining tissue – no remaining sinew. Just piles of parts.

God asks Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” The God who knows all asks the limited human being what is possible. Ezekiel deflects – “oh God, you know.” And then God calls Ezekiel to speak to the bones, as if bones could hear. God orders Ezekiel to tell the bones that through God’s power, they will have sinews, and flesh, and skin, and breath, and that they will know the LORD.

And sure enough, those bones get to rattling. The once-quiet valley suddenly fills with the uncanny rattling of dry bone reconnecting to dry bone. The sound reverberates off the valley walls. Ezekiel looks again and sinews connect the bones; flesh covers re-formed skeletons. And then, as abruptly as this rustling of activity commenced, so it stops – the bones have become bodies, but they have no breath, no life-force.

In Genesis 2, God creates the first human being from the dust of the earth – the name Adam literally means “dirt person” in Hebrew; “earthling,” if you will. But Adam does not become a living being until God breathes into his

nostrils the breath of life. The same thing happens here in the valley of what used to be dry bones. God calls to Ezekiel a second time, and tells him to command the wind of life to come and fill the bodies – and suddenly, they stood on their feet and lived! The Holy Spirit of God comes to animate the reformed bodies, to make them human and whole.

Then God interprets the vision for Isaiah. God will not leave God's people in exile. Though they feel as good as dead, the LORD will return them from the valley of despair to the promised land – the LORD will return them home. The Spirit of the LORD will be with the people and they will know that the LORD acts on their behalf.

For my money, the valley of the dry bones coming to life is one of the most memorable images in the Bible. And I think it was specifically designed to be so. The people to whom Ezekiel spoke, the people of God, were suffering the deepest collective pain – the pain of exile. They were in desperate need of some sign, some promise from God that their oppression would end and that they could know joy again.

Through the prophecy of Ezekiel, God reminds the people that nothing shall be impossible for God. Even the most dead thing imaginable – as dead as desiccated and dissociated bones – God can make even the most dead thing live again. The Spirit of God can breathe possibility where there is none, hope where hope is lost. God's power is so utterly beyond our own that God can restore the dead to life.

This image, of rattling bones and gushing wind – it sticks in the craw. Once you've seen it with your mind's eye, you can't unsee it. And I imagine that is exactly what God intended in giving this image to Ezekiel. This image is an image you can come back to when hope is fleeting and suffering is the only thing in sight. This image helps us to remember the promises of God – that God is for us, that we are loved and valued by God, that God can take even the deadest things in our lives and spring new life from them. This image is one to hold onto, to come back to at the lowest moments of our lives.

When I talk with confirmation students – or with anyone really – when I talk with people about why bad things happen if God is good, we usually end up agreeing that most of the time, it's not worth trying to figure out *why* bad things happen. Bad things happen – they just do. But God sometimes takes the hard things, and by the miracle of grace, breathes the Spirit of life into them; by the miracle of grace God brings about new things, good things, good things that come through the hard things or because of the hard things.

God can redeem even the worst. Keeping watch at a family member's deathbed becomes a sacred time of family bonding, a source of deep spiritual renewal. A community crisis becomes an opportunity for neighbors to actually get to know one another, to build lasting connections. A church fire becomes an opportunity to do ministry in a creative and revitalized way, a way that brings together an unlikely new community.

But just as there's not often a one-to-one correlation between sin and suffering, there's not always a one-to-one correlation between suffering and redemption either. In her popular book "Everything Happens for a Reason – and Other Lies I've Loved," seminary professor Kate Bowler shares many painful things that were said to her when she was diagnosed with stage four colon cancer as a young mom. "God has a better plan!" people said. And, "this is a test from God – it will make you stronger!" Right, because God is sadistic like that, Kate responded, at least internally. How God works is still a mystery. We don't know what God will redeem, or when. Those bones did not become dry overnight; they sat in that valley for a long time, a reason for mourning, a reminder of all that was lost.

But we can also trust that nothing shall be impossible for God. Even in the midst of deep pain, we can remember that throughout history, God has been faithful to God's people. We can call to mind the image of the breath of God animating the valley of dry bones and remember: we worship a God who sees, a God who responds, a God who breathes new life. The wind of God's Spirit can blow through the very driest of places. And even when new life feels far off, as Kate Bowler says in her book: "God is here. We are loved. It is enough."

As we continue through the wilderness journey of Lent – as we continue to mourn all in our world that seems as good as dead – we hold onto this hope. "God is here. We are loved. It is enough." And maybe, just maybe, God can breathe new life into what appears to be beyond all hope. Maybe, just maybe, resurrection is possible.