

Saturday May 30, 2009

u2charist Sermon

St. Michael and All Angels Anglican - Ottawa

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Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Psalm 104:24-34, 35b | Acts 2:1-21 | John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

It's a wonderful thing to be gathered here together, people from all across our diocese, in worship, in prayer, and in solidarity with people suffering from the effects of global poverty. Tonight is a night to remember, it's an amazing opportunity to give of ourselves, as we ask God's inspiration to serve others with our prayers, our actions, our money – our whole lives.

My hope tonight is that this will be an event that spurs us on to greater faithfulness, to asking what more we can do to serve God's world as we return to our homes, and our own parishes.

You see, this evening we are not just here for an event. We're not just here to spice up our liturgy with the some rock songs and be done with it. We're not here simply to enjoy each others' company, and meet new people.

What brings us all together tonight is the reality that there is still pain and suffering in our world. As Christians young and old, we are here to respond to God's call and to the groaning of creation. Whether it be the suffering of our earth under the stress of climate change, or the trauma of those dying due to poverty, malnutrition, or HIV/AIDS in the 2/3 world. Whether it's a teenager cutting themselves due to depression, or an adult struggling to find a job in this economic crunch.

We are here as a community to acknowledge that all is not right with the world, and that as the church, we have the opportunity to do something about it.

Whatever it is, our church, our faith and our God call us to respond to suffering in real and practical ways. And so tonight we're here to do more than simply talk about these things, we also have the opportunity to open ourselves to God's transforming spirit, and to listen to what God might be calling us and our church to do.

This same spirit is the life-giving spirit that was present in the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. It is the spirit we encounter in Ezekiel's prophecy. It is the spirit that comes in like a rushing wind to anoint Jesus' followers at Pentecost. And it is the very same spirit that moves in this place today as we celebrate that very event.

The spirit of God is in this place, as we raise money for and awareness of the Millennium Development Goals. And so, as we continue our service, we need to bring the Development Goals into focus.

In 2001, 192 member states of the United Nations agreed upon these eight goals, goals that we're aiming to achieve by the year 2015. These are goals that aim to spur development and global health by improving the social and economic conditions of the world's poorest countries.

The first goal is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

- Because over 1.4 billion people in our world live on less than \$1 per day

The second goal is to achieve universal primary education

- Because for those who live below the poverty line, even school fees of \$50 per year are unattainable.
- Achieving even primary education is one way in which people are able to break the cycle of poverty

The third goal is to achieve gender equality and empower women

- Because in many places, women do not have access to education, and their human rights are not guaranteed.
- Throughout the world, it's been said that women do 66% of the world's work, produce 50% of the world's food, but received 10% of its income and own 1% of the world's property.

The fourth goal is to reduce child mortality

- In Canada, only six children for every 1000 born die before the age of five
- And yet, worldwide, the number is 72 per 1000
- And in some countries this can reach 300 per 1000, or 3 in 10

The fifth goal is to improve maternal health

- Because worldwide, 1 woman dies every minute due to pregnancy-related causes, and in some nations, over 2000 women in every 100,000 live births does not survive

The sixth goal is to combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and other Diseases

- Because right now Malaria kills 1 million people per year
- And every day, nearly 7,500 people are infected with HIV and 5,500 die from AIDS

The seventh goal is to ensure environmental sustainability

- Because about 1.2 billion people live where water is scarce
- Only 22 percent of the world's fisheries are sustainable
- Our forests are shrinking by 7.3 million hectares each year
- And carbon levels in our atmosphere are dangerously high

The eighth goal is to develop a global partnership for development

- Because aid flows need to increase by \$18 Billion per year to meet the promise made by the G8 in 2005 of doubling aid by 2010
- Because developing countries are still sinking under the burden of external debt
- And because many countries still need affordable access to the drugs that fight HIV/AIDS, malaria and Tuberculosis.

And so tonight, in support of the Stephen Lewis Foundation and PWRDF, we're declaring that we want to be a part of the solution. One of the reasons why we've been asked to raise money in our congregations, is to support these goals.

In Stephen Lewis' book "Race Against Time," he points out that much of the ongoing poverty in the world is a direct result of the AIDS epidemic. And so tonight, the money we give will go directly to support work with those who suffer from HIV/AIDS. But it doesn't have to stop there. We and our families and our parishes should be trying to reach out to others on a regular and consistent basis. And that will be the challenge as we return home this evening.

It was a few years ago now, and I remember standing there, stunned. I had no idea what to do as I stood around on my first day at Kalighat, Mother Teresa's home for the dying in Calcutta. It was my second day in India, and I was still overwhelmed by all that I had seen and heard since landing at the airport at 5am the day before. 5am and it was already 30 degrees.

The smells. The heat. My eyes were heavy. I was tired after a long journey. Beggars on the corner. Not just one corner. Every corner. Men and women missing limbs. Naked children grabbing at my hand, my pocket demanding enough money to buy a bit of rice. Bicycles with 30, 50, maybe even a hundred chickens hanging from them. A burning rubbish heap. Diesel thick in the air. The sounds of hundreds of car horns honking simultaneously.

There I was, my first visit to India, this tall awkward blonde kid in the middle of a city so different from my hometown. I stood out. I was out of place. I was in a city I couldn't possibly hope to understand. And not simply because I didn't speak the language.

Everything normal to me was 12,000 kilometers away. I was far from home. I wasn't sure how to cope. Unanswerable questions came at me from all directions.

Why am I here? Why did I even come? How am I going to deal with the heat, the smells, all the people? When can I go back home?

There I was, thousands of miles from home, on the other side of the world, in the midst of poverty and affliction I'd never seen. My life in Canada was so different. I was a student – I didn't think that I was rich by any stretch...and yet in this place, I was starting to realise how much I did have. I had a lot. I had so much. How else had I flown to the other side of the world in the first place? How much food could that plane ticket have bought for the people I had just met on the street?

One morning at breakfast I met a former war correspondent from Holland. As he and I were walking across town to our volunteer house, he started telling me of his own discomfort, his own sense of trepidation. This was a journalist who'd been sent into the middle of armed conflict the world over. And he too was overwhelmed.

But for the people of Calcutta, none of this was new. This was real life. This was simply the way it was.

For me, it was culture shock. This was trauma and stress and disorientation.

And yet I had come there for a reason. I had come to serve, to give, to learn. But I didn't know what it was I could actually do. I had options, and decisions to make. I could close down, shut out everything around me, or I could open myself to this, open myself to the movement of God's spirit, I could open myself to be changed.

But we all know that transformation isn't easy, and transformation most often happens in the face of danger.

Almost as if to awaken me to where I was, my friend Ryan patted me on the back, pointed to a bed and said, "Go visit him. Take this cream and massage his legs."

Skin and bones. Nothing but skin and bones. There was nothing I could do to communicate with this man. As I started to look at him, as I looked into his eyes, I realised that we were about the same age. I was overwhelmed. Shocked. He was what? Twenty-five? Maybe a bit older? And there he lay, on a bed, in this home amongst the dying. He too was dying. Cancer. The muscular legs of a rickshaw driver laid waste.

In that moment I began to imagine what it must have been like to live amongst the dead. To know that the only way out of that place was on a stretcher.

What would it be like to wonder if you were the next to go? The dying amongst the dead. The dead amongst the dying.

I tend to associate that experience in Calcutta with Ezekiel's prophecy, I think, because it's the closest I can get to understanding his bizarre vision. I had been lifted up from the comfort of my own home and set down in the middle of a valley of dry bones. A place where death was commonplace – a far cry from the image obsessed culture I had left behind. A far cry from a society that denies human mortality.

Ezekiel's prophecy is strange at every turn. A few chapters earlier he's speaking to the mountains, and tonight's reading has him in the midst of an acid-trip zombie movie in a valley shadowed with death. This is stress-induced, vision-inspired performance art at it's best. But it's more Fringe Festival fare than something you'd catch at the NAC.

Ezekiel is shell-shocked, ragged, and tired. We'd probably call it Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. His behaviour may be erratic, but you'd expect that from someone who'd endured so much. Exiled by the Babylonians a thousand miles from home.

His friends, his family – even *his own wife* had been taken from him. She's dead. She's long dead. And there's nothing, *absolutely nothing*, he can do to bring her dry bones back to life.

God sweeps him up and sets him down into the middle of a valley. A valley of dry bones. As if the reality of his own suffering wasn't enough, here he is, caught up by the spirit and thrown into what immediately seems like the pit of despair. Wandering despondently, exhausted, defeated, through mounds of bones.

Walking through the valley, you can almost hear him asking himself, what is this? What is this all about? Why have you brought me here? *Dear God*, what is it you want to show me?

Yahweh! Yahweh! I've seen it. I've seen it all before. The bones of the dead piled up throughout the world. Why God have you brought me back? *Yahweh! Yahweh!* I'm still waiting for the dawn. When will this exile, this suffering, this trauma end?

Brothers and sisters. Children & parents. Grandparents and Grandchildren. The whole house of Israel. Bones piled everywhere. You can almost hear him muttering expletives under his breath.

Today, as we consider the Millennium Development Goals and the work that needs to be done, we can draw the connections. Because Ezekiel's story could just as easily be the story of people in the two-thirds world.

Their bones dried up.
Dried in the droughts of global warming
and the poverty of unfair trade
Their hope fades.

Their bones dried up
Ravaged by AIDS, malaria and disease
Bellies starved of food, minds hungry for education
Their hopes dashed yet again

Their bones dried up
Mothers without proper natal care
And children dying before their fifth birthday
Their hope for the next generation lost.

And here, today, in this space, we cry out, *Yahweh! Yahweh!* and we sing it out loud. We cry out to *Yahweh*, and we sing, "There's always pain before the child is born." But what if you're not sure you'll even survive the pregnancy? And we cry out *Yahweh! Yahweh!* And as we pray, we're still waiting for the dawn.

Because for Ezekiel the dawn isn't here. He's waiting for the dawning of a new age, an end to this dark page in a history of fire and rage. Because yes, there is darkness. And yes, there is pain. And it is real. And it can be oppressive and it can be bleak.

But he doesn't have to stay there forever.

And neither do we. We don't have to dwell in the valley of dry bones.

Even though sometimes we might find ourselves stuck in a moment we can't get out of. Even though sometimes, we might feel there's no escape from Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. It's the history of Israel, it's the history of the church, it's the history of humanity that we go astray, that we curse the Good Shepherd's rod and staff.

We find ourselves asking again and again if there's gonna be peace on earth. But it's not all a chasing after the wind. Because the creative, life-giving wind of the Holy Spirit has come for us. We may have started this service with u2's interpretation of the book of Ecclesiastes, but we will not end in such disorientation.

The rushing winds of Pentecost have met us here today, as they met the earliest members of the Christian church.

This is the story of Ezekiel. This is the story of the church being birthed at Pentecost. And this is our story.

In a few moments we will respond. And we will respond with the words of a song:

Jesus, Jesus help me
I'm alone in this world
And a messed up world it is too

Tell me, tell me the story
The one about eternity
And the way it's all gonna be

At times it may seem as though we're alone in this messed up world. At times it might seem overwhelming to know where to start. And so today, we start with a story, a good story, God's story. This is the story we all know - the one about eternity and the way it's all gonna be.

Because for Ezekiel, and for us, it's easy enough to get bogged down by the magnitude of it all. It is easy enough to get disoriented by the size of the task. And yet into this confusion, the Creator God of Israel speaks. Yahweh speaks, and Yahweh asks, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

For Ezekiel, standing in the valley of dry bones, I wonder what he must have been thinking. Bones stacked up like death toll statistics around him, and God dares ask the unanswerable question. "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Speechless. I imagine that there was a long pause after God asked this question. I imagine that before he answered, Ezekiel just stood there, soaking it all in, staring in disbelief. I imagine Ezekiel just standing there, much like the disciples who had seen Jesus' last breath on the cross. Dumbstruck. Speechless. Wanting desperately to hope, and to believe.

Having seen so much destruction, I wonder if Ezekiel began calculating the odds. Could it be done? What were the chances? But then, after some time, Ezekiel answers wisely. And he responds with these words: "O Lord God, You Know."

For Ezekiel and for us, the answer hinges on this: Who is this God we believe in? What is the story we're a part of?

Because if the bones are to live, their life is dependent on the creating God who brought forth the heavens and the earth; the God of all that is, seen and unseen. The God who was, and is, and is to come.

If these bones are to live, their life relies on the God who created all people, each and every one, in God's own image.

If these bones are to live, their life relies on the covenantal God who carried Israel out of Egypt.

If these bones are to live, their life relies on God's call of prophets and witnesses into the whole world.

If these bones are to live, their life relies on the outpouring of God's spirit upon our sons and daughters who shall prophesy, the young seeing visions and the old dreaming dreams.

If these bones are to live, their life must come from the caring hands of the great physician.

This is the covenant-making God who prepares a table in the presence of our enemies.

This is the promise-keeping God who sacrificed his own life that we might live.

And this is the God who spoke through Ezekiel, prophesying that his people would indeed come back to life. The fortunes of Israel would be restored.

To the bones, Ezekiel prophesies God's words, saying "breath will enter you, and you shall live. Sinews and flesh will come together, and you will be covered once again with skin. You will breathe once again, you shall live, and you shall know your God."

For Ezekiel, and for us, it's about faith in action. Ezekiel, in faith, relies on God. He does not rely on his own schemes, he does not toy with his calculations any longer. In faith, Ezekiel immerses himself in the story of the God who redeems his people, and redeems all of creation.

Immersed in the story of God's grace, and empowered by God's spirit, the answer is all but spoken. If these bones are to live, it will be God at work through God's people who bring them back to life. In responding to God's daring, dangerous question, Ezekiel's world is transformed before his eyes.

The impossible, in faith, becomes possible.

The overwhelming becomes doable.

The stranger becomes knowable.

And the solution becomes tangible.

And so today, we like Ezekiel, are called to respond in faith. As we respond in prayer. As we respond with our hearts, our time, our money - indeed our whole lives - we do so in faith. And we respond to the God of resurrection.

As a church, we have a job to do. And that job is to proclaim that yes, in fact, dry bones can live. We are called to proclaim this truth to as many as will listen and respond.

It may not at first seem probable. To many it might not seem possible. And yet, as we gather around the table today, we proclaim the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And as we participate in that together, we acknowledge our own role in practicing resurrection.

There are all kinds of ways we can do that. We can challenge our families and our churches to commit 0.7% of their annual budgets towards the Millennium Development Goals on top of our other giving. We can do this personally, and we can also call on our government to uphold its commitment to do the same.

And as we seek justice in our own lives, we can encourage our friends, our neighbours, and especially our politicians to demand that Canada do its part. It's all a part of seeing dry bones live.

We can learn more about the issues by reading books like Stephen Lewis' "Race Against Time." We can check out the resources from PWRDF and justgeneration.ca. And we can pray. We can pray, we

can give and we can act. We can pray that God would continue to send the spirit to guide us as we seek desperately to make poverty history. It starts with one heart, one group of friends, one church at a time.

We are one. There is no us and them. Where we embrace the other, where there is just us, there is justice. It starts here, in this room, with the spirit's anointing, and it flows to the ends of the earth.

As I stared once again into the eyes of that young man laying on the bed in Calcutta, and as I rubbed the balm on my hands, he began to smile. My fingers moved awkwardly at first, straining to work out the knots and kinks in this young man's legs. As the hour went by, my arms and my shoulders grew tired.

A nun came by and sat down beside us. She stroked his head, and spoke gently to him in Bengali. I continued to work on his legs, his arms, and eventually moved down to massage his feet. These feet had carried him far. They would carry him no further – he could no longer walk. This young man who had once depended on his legs and feet for his livelihood would walk on no more.

And yet, as I looked up from the foot of the bed, as I caught his gaze, we both began to smile. The young man spoke excitedly to the nun by his side, and she translated for me. "He says thank-you," she said. "Thank-you for coming here. Thank-you for spending your time at my bedside."

There was new life in his eyes. There was renewed vigour, and an incredible spark. A twinkle in his eye. My time there that day didn't change everything. But it changed something. It changed something in him, and it changed something in me.

The nun reached over to me and repeated something that I've now heard many times since. "Mother always used to say" the nun told me, "we can do no great things, only small things with great love."

Mama T had a point.

It starts with one heart, one group of friends, one church at a time. We are one, under one love. It starts at the communion table. It spreads with the spirit's anointing, and it flows, by God's grace to the ends of the earth.

And so tonight may we respond to such grace with gratitude, as we seek the spirit's leading in the redemption of all things.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.