

Our Lenten sermon series has been built around the theme of God’s Passions: Forgiveness, Protection, Trust, Hospitality, and today, Redemption.

And we’ve been using the psalms as our guide along this Lenten journey because the psalms are, more than anything, declarations that are a response to God’s enormous passion to connect with your life and mine.

Whether they deal with adoration, confession of sin, protests of innocence, complaints about suffering, pleas for deliverance, assurances of being heard, petitions before battle, or thanksgiving afterwards, the psalms give voice to this passionate relationship between God and God’s people.

(Read Psalm 130)

Psalm 130 is a cry for help. Our psalmist, somewhere several millennia ago waking in the darkness of night, believing that with the dawn, watching for the morning, there will come redemption, salvation, hope, healing, freedom, new life.

Simply said, we cry for help because we believe we need help, and need it urgently. We cry for help because for some reason or another, we cannot help ourselves.

Biblically, think about the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, for instance. They needed to be saved from slavery. That’s what they were crying out for day after day.

Think about those exiles in Babylon, and how Ezekiel’s vision of a valley of dry bones was, for them, a sign of their need for help, and with it, a promise that God wasn’t going to leave them to rot in exile, but rather restore their life and bring them home.

Story after story, when the people of ancient Israel became helpless, as our psalmist prays – “Out of the depths I cry to you...”, and note the shift from the personal “hear my voice, O Lord” to the community, “O Israel, hope in the Lord...with him is great power to redeem.”

Dry bones seeking life, God would come after them. God would come looking for them, seeking out their redemption.

God’s breath of new life into dry bones, God’s help to our cries is more than being saved from our sins, and more than being saved from hell.

In other words, there is more than one way to be saved and more than one thing we need to be saved from.

- I think about the man who stays in his office, long after quitting time, wishing that he didn’t have to go home. He’s made a success of himself at the expense of his family, and the atmosphere at home is toxic. He looks at the picture on his desk, the one that was taken on his wedding day, and wonders: “Can these bones live?”
- I think about the single mother, sitting at her kitchen table after a long day at work, surrounded by stacks of bills. She looks at her bank balance, and how little there is to work with. She thinks of her children, and all she dreams for their lives. She shakes her head and wonders: “Can these bones live?”
- I think of the young man who has just been released from prison; convicted of a crime that he admits was the tragic result of drugs and the wrong crowd. But he’s clean, worked hard to get his GED, but no jobs and he’s afraid that the past will never let him go, and he asks, “Can these bones live?”
- I think of the college student who has just finished another stressful phone call with parents. More questions about the ever-increasing, how-will-you-pay-your-student-loans, like we said you wouldn’t have if you

had stayed home for community college...what are you doing about a job...maybe if your grades were better. Will I ever please my parents and make them happy, proud of me; and those 'I can't wait for the morning' kind of thoughts creep back in of why not just end it now, "Can these bones live?"

- I think of the old man who steps out the front door of his home, settles on the front steps with his coffee, looks out over his neighborhood and notices how dirty and run-down it is, how different from those neighborhoods on the other side of town. "Can these bones live?" he asks.

As Ezekiel would sigh and wonder, too, "You tell me, Lord. I don't know."

And then God does tell him, he tells him to preach to the bones and say, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath 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 breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

Whether Ezekiel believes it or not, God believes that new life is possible. God commands the prophet to preach to the bones. And to his credit Ezekiel does, and when he does, a miracle occurs.

It is the miracle of our psalm, the miracle that comes as the psalmist waits through the shadowy valleys of a deathly night, sitting in the intensive care unit of one's own soul on life-support.

And the word comes, just as it came for the Hebrew slaves, just as it came for Ezekiel and the exiles in Babylon, just as it comes for you and me in the bread and the cup.

"Hope in God!" is the command that redeemed people have reason to utter to the dry bones of humanity.

A call to hope cannot be issued by people who live in despair.

A call to hope will not be issued by people who live burdened by a sense of failure.

A call to hope will never be persuasive when made by religious people who sing about "Amazing Grace" but practice accounting guilt.

A call to hope for redemption, new life, new joy, and new fellowship with God can only come from people who know that God has a passion for forgiveness, protection, trust, and hospitality.

The Bible tells us repeatedly that God is a redeemer.

God is in the business of redemption. God is in the business, in particular, of redeeming human lives not only from trouble or exile or slavery but God has a passion to redeem human lives from futility and meaninglessness, from bondage to old ways and bad habits, from the consequences of our own stubborn willfulness and at times our own stupidity.

God longs to redeem our lives from every effect of sin within our lives that breaks down our relationship with God; that breaks down our relationships with others, especially those we love; that breaks down our relationship even within ourselves, when we no longer know who we are.

From everything that would cripple us, God longs to redeem us and even from the power of death itself, God's redemption longs to be active.

In the songs we sing, the words *redeem*, *redemption*, and *redeemer* are words that we throw out as big religious words.

But we miss it sometimes, not really understanding what's being said. In the Bible, all of these words are related to the world of being captive and slave.

Such as when Job says, "O Lord, you took up my case. You redeemed my life."

He is talking about being set free.

That wonderful preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story in her book *Speaking of Sin*, about visiting an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in the basement of a Presbyterian church.

She writes about a young man who was there with his mother, and how he shared his terribly vivid story of addiction and self-destruction.

Taylor said that more than once, she wanted to jump up and clap her hands over his mother's ears.

But then she says, "What was I afraid of? That someone would be revealed for who he or she is. That I will be revealed for who I am, and that it will not be a pretty sight."

And yet, she says, the people in AA believe that their lives depend on doing exactly that: telling the truth about who they are and how they've failed. They don't try to defend themselves. They don't try to blame others.

They just put it all out there – the ugly, unvarnished truth – believing that this is how change begins but believing, also, that new life is possible.

Redemption begins, apparently, by telling the truth about the way things are, but also by believing that they can be different, that new life is possible, and being willing to do the work it will take to get you there, and it continues by believing that you do not work alone.

The hopeful truth about God's grace that burns through the words of Psalm 130 was made human in the life and work of Jesus Christ.

Because of Jesus, we have personal proof that God is forgiving. Because of Jesus, we have personal proof that God will redeem fallen people.

Because of Jesus, we have personal proof that the passion of God is more powerful and trustworthy than the forces of sin and hell.

Because of the proof God has given us in Jesus, we have reason to appear boldly before God in prayer seeking forgiveness.

We have reason to boldly accept the hospitality of this table and to receive the life-giving bread and cup in a community of dry bones.

And, we have reason to boldly call these dry bones to live – to live in hope, and be part of what God is doing to redeem humanity from captivity to sin and every oppressive thing that goes with it.

The truth will set you free!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.