

## ***Breath of Hope***

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Two paragraphs from a writer named Sandra Rooney caught my attention this week as I pondered the lesson from Ezekiel. She says:

***With all the turmoil in the Arab world and the earthquake in Japan, many other events in the world are going largely unnoticed. One such is the preparation for the creation of world's newest nation, South Sudan. A peace agreement signed on January 9, 2005 brought an end to a civil war between the largely Islamic North and the South, largely Christian and Animist. The 22-year civil war had cost 2 million Sudanese their lives and displaced 4 million more. Among the displaced were thousands of children. Some had been forced to become child soldiers, others were sent from their homes by their families at the height of the violence. We know the story of how they ended up trekking hundreds of miles through swamps, desert, and hostile territory. In 2000/2001 the United States granted refugee status to approximately 3800 young boys, who became known as the "Lost Boys of Sudan."***

***Now, at the dawn of South Sudan's new statehood, which will be declared in July 2012, more "Lost Boys" and others are returning to join in a new era of nation building. They are driven by familial obligation, nationalism, and a desire to help strengthen the new country's foundation. "I feel I must go and stand where our house was," said Dominic Deng Diing, who ran from his burning village at the age of six. Since the referendum, the Government of South Sudan Mission to the United States and the United Nations in Washington, D.C., reports about 50 people a week have sought help in processing the paperwork for their returns.***

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Picture the valley of the dry bones. The word for valley here also means, 'plain' and we can see in our minds eye a desert place where nothing grows, nothing lives, a desolate place, a hopeless place, a dead place. That's what the dry bones are all about. Lifeless bodies, symbolizing in the prophet's vision a lifeless people, a spiritless people, a people not growing in their relationship with God and thus not growing in their life as a community; a people feeling the desolation of separation from their highest ideals of justice, compassion, mercy, and humility, a people without hope that what was once great in them: their being the chosen people of God, has any possibility of renewal, of rebirth, of, dare I say it, resurrection.

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The lost boys certainly felt it at one time. Two million dead in civil war; families ripped apart, parents murdered, brothers and sisters separated by circumstances. Children bearing arms against their countrymen against their will and against all that is human, for a meal, for a place to sleep, for another day of life, if that's what you call their existence in those days. Swamps, desert territory, war zones, valleys of dry bones, a plain of desolation, killing fields of death and destruction.

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A peace agreement, bones coming together, a new state, a new status: from refugee to citizen; sinew on sinew, families coming back together; life on life, fields being planted, homes being reconstructed, hope being born, children trekking to school and play instead of to camps and battlefields; a breath of hope in an arid land, a word of life spoken to a people passionate for peace, a vision as eloquent as the prophet's that a dead nation may reach for those same ideals in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that the people Israel sought after in ancient times: care of children, compassion for the outcast, rest for the weary, food for the hungry, mercy for the wrongdoer, justice for the evildoer, community focused in the dreams of the people for sovereignty and civility in place of civil war.

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At the site of burnt out homes, there has arisen the possibility of renewal, of rebirth, of, dare I say it, resurrection.

Ezekiel 37 says, in a different rendering than we heard today:

God grabbed me. God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones. He led me around and among them—a lot of bones! There were bones all over the plain—dry bones, bleached by the sun.

<sup>3</sup> He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Master God, only you know that."

<sup>4</sup> He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!'"

<sup>5-6</sup> God, the Master, told the dry bones, "Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!"

There is another text like this in our sacred texts:

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days." Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

Kate Huey reflects on this passage with challenges for today when she says, A long time ago, in a far-off land, Jesus stood outside that tomb and called out, "Lazarus, come out!" God is still speaking to us today, calling us out from our tombs of despair, denial, and death to new life, right now, right here. What is that tomb for you? In what ways do you participate in what God is doing, today, in your midst, when God brings new life in the face of death? How are you "unbinding" and "letting go" those who have been put into such places of death? Are some in your community standing around and watching, formulating their judgments and deciding what they'll believe and how much they'll believe it, or are they moving to the center of what's happening, pulling back the "stuff" of death, the things that surround death, and releasing the new life that God has granted, the new life that lies just beneath the surface of what appears bleak and beyond hope? Are there some among us who are calculating the costs and the possible unpleasantness of giving ourselves over to the power of God, even to healing and new life?

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Here is our spiritual home, friends, a place where it is supposed to be safe to disclose what is dead in us, what is uninspired in us, what is challenging us most in daily living, and hear a word of hope and renewal that can happen in the most fearful and sorrowful moments of life, refreshment and rebirth that can happen even in the most desperate of spirits, resurrection that can not only be proclaimed as it will be in weeks to come but experienced today when the prophet says, "Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!" and when Jesus says, "Come out!"

Friends in the church, we come close to the end our journey together to Jerusalem, to the cross, to the grave, and to the stone rolled away. Come out, and finish the journey together, that we might become harbingers of the new life we experience in this place, messengers of God's vision for the whole world community, emissaries

of the invitation to new life, recipients of God's welcome into the community of the revived.

Then we'll know that God is God, and these bones shall live and breathe the breath of life on the community and the world. Jesus said once, "You will do still greater things than I have done!" Blessings upon your life and your doing, this day and every day, in Jesus' name. Amen.