

I hope that last week’s sermon on Psalm 23rd was a comfort to you, because today’s lectionary text leads us to a place of dry bones, a lifeless place, a place where the prophet wonders whether resurrection is even possible. This valley of death is a symbol of Israel, defeated and taken as captives to Babylon. The question was very real: Would Israel as a people, a nation, ever again exist? Can death ever lead to life? The prophet says: “Hear the word of the Lord.”

Funny how the Bible leads us from passages of great comfort and consolation such as Psalm 23 to the depths of human despair. Nothing in human existence is off-limits to the word of the Lord. I remember that as a single mother raising two little girls, working and going to graduate school, I didn’t have time to thoroughly watch or listen to the news. I was focused on making it through another day and being a good mother. Now I see that not having time to know what was happening was naive bliss. This year I tried to give up the news for Lent, but I haven’t been too successful — though I do turn it off more often. Perhaps one reason we gather in this place on Sundays is because the world out there is pretty messed up, and we need to be encouraged to have courage and do our best for one more week.

As the rhetoric of how to solve the world’s problems becomes the “same old same old,” I keep wondering what I can do to make things better—something more I can do — something I hadn’t thought about before. Unlike my days of single parenthood when I had no spare time and no extra money, now I have a little of both. Shouldn’t I be able to do something more? As is our custom, when Tom brought me coffee a week ago Saturday morning, we had a long talk. So much of whatever I offer is due to his thoughtful and faithful intellect. So he summarized three basic underlying problems we face.

First, our fights over budgets and economics are based on an economy that requires growth. To come out of recession we must grow. To put people back to work is based on producing more. Our standard of living is correlated to acquisition of material goods.

Now this reminded me of those two words from last Sunday’s text Psalm 23: “not want.” ***“The Lord is my shepherd I shall not want.”*** Last week I mentioned the paradox of these words: The shepherd provides so that we have what we need and do not live “in want;” yet, we see people coming to the door of our Food Kitchen every week who are “in want.”

While our system of economic survival as a nation is based on wanting and producing more, scripture tells us, “The Lord is our shepherd, we shall not want.” So this led me to think that perhaps the problem is that some of us want what we do not need and hoard resources that others do need.

When the Israelites were led out of slavery, God provided for them manna each day and on the sixth day they collected enough manna for two days so that they could keep the Sabbath. The story tells us that they began to think collecting more than just one day’s worth might be a good idea and so they tried it. God didn’t like this idea so much and the excess manna spoiled. Jesus taught us to pray the prayer, ***“Give us this day our daily bread.”***

So one big problem we face is that our earth cannot sustain an economy based purely on endless growth, acquiring more and more forever. And neither can our souls. Because once we become devoted to more stuff, there’s little room in our hearts to be devoted to God. And if God’s spirit is not in us, we become like dry bones.

A second big problem is that of agriculture. We will not be able to sustain growing enough food for the world's population. Some may believe that technology will solve this problem; however, as we genetically alter food, fungi and insects evolve to attack and destroy.

Without the diversification of the plant and animal world, living things become more specialized and risk extinction. As small farms are driven out by larger corporations who can (for a while, at least) produce more and cheaper food, communities are fractured and become dependent and vulnerable to shareholders and companies who have power over them and who do not always act in their best interest. This is why David is selling fairly traded coffee and tea during fellowship hour; he helps us support small farmers all over the world.

Integral to the problem of agriculture is soil depletion. Modern agriculture essentially mines the soil, steadily reducing its productivity. The Hebrew Bible commanded that every seven years the fields lie fallow in order to rejuvenate. This was a very hard commandment to follow for people for whom starvation was always a very real possibility; yet they knew that if they didn't do this, the land would not produce in the future; it would become a land of literally dry bones of starving people.

A third big problem is climate change; this problem is becoming clearer all the time. Extremes in the planet's climate are already wreaking havoc often to those least able to escape. Our economy based on consumption and growth and our need to grow more and more food contribute to an ecosystem strained and a dependency on fossil fuels that are warming our world and making our economic survival dependent on sometimes awful compromises to foreign countries going back for decades. Genesis describes God's creative responsive love in forming life out of chaos; and how the Spirit did this, whether by word or evolution, does not diminish the breath that brought life into being. If God's breath is in the life of this creation, then to love God means we love all creation.

In one of the Genesis stories, even before God creates humankind, God creates the other living things and "saw that it was good." So if God values all creation, we, too, faithfully cherish the breath of God we experience around us.

Each of these problems that may bring a "valley of dry bones" is our opportunity to be with God's creative love. In this passage God tells Ezekiel to prophesy, and as Ezekiel does so, what is dead comes to life. God uses Ezekiel to speak, "the word of the Lord." The breath of hope is God's to give and God depends on us to proclaim it. And faithful people are indeed proclaiming that small is beautiful, that sharing is best, that locally grown, organic, animal friendly, and fairly traded food is good, that sustainability rather than constant growth makes for a more peaceable world, and that communities everywhere matter.

John Cobb, a resident of Pilgrim Place, who has spoken from this pulpit, emphasizes God's presence within creation and God's being effected by what we do; not only to other human beings but to other animals and to the earth itself. He writes these words in his book, *Sustaining the Common Good*: ***"The Christian who accepts this vision as more faithful to the biblical witness than the deism it seeks to replace cannot remain easy with the continuation of present practices. The suffering we are imposing on other creatures and on our human descendants we are imposing on the God who so loved us as to freely suffer on our behalf. If we can cease to add to the divine suffering only by personal sacrifice, the willingness to make such sacrifices will seem an appropriate response to God's gifts to us."*** (p.22).

May we, "hear the word of the Lord," and through faithful living receive God's breath of hope for a suffering world.