Ezekiel, Tommy and Arthur
A sermon on Ezekiel 37:1-14 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul’s ~ Syracuse, NY ~ April 20, 2019

There is a confusing part of life; we call it loss. There is a terrible part of life; we call it despair. There is a terrifying part of life; we call it death. This is the place where God speaks to us.

Ezekiel was led by the spirit of the Lord. The Lord set Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. The Lord led Ezekiel all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.

Ezekiel was in a place of death. Ezekiel was in a place of desolation. Ezekiel was at the sight of some sort of massacre. Hundreds of people were killed in this valley. They were not buried. Their bodies were left to rot. Their corpses were left in the open air, to be eaten by coyotes and hyenas and vultures. When the wild animals had eaten all of the internal organs and picked the flesh off the bones, the skeletons were left, lying in the desert for decades, the wind polishing them smooth with grains of sand.

Ezekiel was in a place of death. This is a solemn moment in our journey as God’s people of faith. Yet As we have read this story for the past 2500 years we have become blind to the horror and despair of the image. As we have read this story over and over again we have become more and more comfortable with it.

One of the most lighthearted songs of my childhood is based on Ezekiel’s journey into the valley of the dry bones: “Ezekiel had them dry bones, the knee bone connected to the leg bone, the leg bone connected to the foot bone, the foot bone connected to the toe bone.” And before you knew it we were all dancing around the floor to the sounds of Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra, dressed in white tuxedos, toasting each other with champagne.

We like Tommy Dorsey’s version of this story; it is so much easier to dance to Tommy Dorsey’s version than Ezekiel’s version. We like the Tommy Dorsey version of the valley of the dry bones, but sometimes life is more like Ezekiel’s version of the valley of the dry bones. We find ourselves in that terrifying place, the place where we come face to face with the despair and emptiness of a great loss.

Some of us have come face to face with the parched reality of death. Sometimes it is a place where we are cut off completely from the things that brought love and meaning into our lives. That is what happened to Ezekiel and his people. Ezekiel was a prophet in Judah 600 years before the time of Christ. Ezekiel was one of the leaders of the people. When Ezekiel was a young man Jerusalem was invaded by the armies of Babylon. The Babylonians sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple of Solomon. The king was forced to watch as his sons were killed by the Babylonians, then the soldiers put out his eyes. Then Ezekiel, and the king and the other leaders were taken as hostages to Babylon.

This was the situation of the people of Israel. Their people had been killed. They had been put in chains. Their hope was lost. They sat in exile, in Babylon far from home for five years, ten years, thirty years. Their parents and their husbands and wives died as they waited in exile.

Then the Lord said to Ezekiel, 'these bones are the whole house of Israel. The people of Israel are saying, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore I command you to go and say to my people, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from this place of death,, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from this place of utter despair.

The people did not expect that the years after the destruction of the Temple would be the time when they would hear God speak to them, saying My dear people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.
It is a strange thing. We say that God is good. Yet God is most powerfully beside us, not in a place of goodness, but in a place of death. It is a strange thing. We know that God is good. Yet God is most powerfully working within us, not in a place of happiness, but in a place of loss and emptiness.

110 years ago a baby boy was born in Toledo, Ohio, less than a mile from where I went to high school. His parents named him Arthur. Soon they noticed that Arthur was different. Arthur couldn’t see well; Arthur was almost completely blind.

Arthur’s parents must have been concerned. Arthur was one or two years old, their only child. Arthur’s older brother had died in infancy. Arthur’s father was a mechanic. His mother was a housekeeper. They were people of color in the early 20th century. How would this little boy make his way in the world? How would he get by, feeling his way through a hostile world?

Months went by. Arthur grew taller. Arthur grew tall enough to reach the keys of the piano in the front hall. Arthur tried all of the keys, listening carefully. He began to compose little melodies, first with one finger, then with two or three or four fingers. Within a few years Arthur was picking out tunes he heard from the radio on the piano.

When he was a boy Arthur didn’t have piano lessons, he just played the piano. Just after his tenth birthday the preacher asked Arthur to play the piano in church. That day Arthur’s parents and the people of Arthur’s neighborhood began to realize God was doing something completely new in the life of this boy.

By the time Arthur was fifteen years old he was playing the piano for hundreds of students and teachers at assemblies at Jesup W. Scott High School, my alma mater. By the time Arthur Tatum was twenty, hundreds of people in the world of jazz were coming to know his name. By the time Art Tatum was forty he was the most famous pianist in America. Millions of people all over America heard a kind of piano playing that had never been heard before Tatum began to play. They were listening to Art Tatum on the radio. When Art Tatum played piano it sounded like something they had never heard before.

When those millions of people heard Art Tatum play the piano on the radio they probably didn’t know the whole story. When they heard Tatum play the piano they might have known that he was blind, but they probably didn’t think too much about where he started and the difficulty of his journey. I doubt that many of them had much of an idea of the concern his mother and father carried in their hearts when he was a little blind two year old boy, feeling his way around the house.

When people hear Art Tatum’s music today they often have no idea of the true details of his story. The greatest, most creative piano player of all time came to create this music out of a time of difficulty, out of a situation that was not privileged or rich, out of a place of uncertainty and despair.

I have been playing and studying piano music for fifty years. When I hear Art Tatum play there is no possible conclusion in my mind but that he was given an extraordinary gift for music by the one who created him. As I learn Tatum’s story I can only come to the conclusion that once again, God breathed tremendous creativity and power into a life that we might have treated as worthless or hopeless, like a pile of dry, dead bones.

We are people of faith, so we give thanks for the gifts God has given us. What we often fail to understand is that God speaks to us most powerfully in our situations of hopelessness and despair. God gives us the greatest gifts in our times of emptiness. For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.