

Dr. Carl L. Schenck
Manchester United Methodist Church
March 17, 2002
“Hopeless Situations”
Ezekiel 37: 1-14, John 11: 1-45

In order for us to get our head and heart around our scripture lessons today, particularly our Old Testament lesson, I need to tell you an imaginary, hypothetical and not at all pretty story. Use your imagination. There are things in this imaginary story that certainly would be horrifying if it were to happen, we would hope it would never happen, but it can help us understand the Old Testament lesson.

So imagine with me, imagine with me a young person who grows up in Washington D.C. who is the child of parents who are in the diplomatic corps and who work in the U.S. Department of State. Imagine this young person has one and only one ambition all his young life and that is to enter into public service as a diplomat with the United States government. This young person goes through high school and then to college and studies international relations and languages. He completes a master's and a PhD. degree in international relations. Just as he is ready to apply for service in the State Department to serve his country and to serve in the profession that he has always dreamed of, just as this happened, imagine that somewhere in South America, a great powerful empire begins to assert itself. This great and powerful empire in South America becomes a world power. Its armies march up through Central America and into central United States and conquers the country, last of all, conquering Washington D.C. Our young hero who is just ready to start a career in the diplomatic corps, sees the destruction of the Capitol building, the Supreme Court, and the burning of the White House. He sees the monuments to Lincoln and Jefferson and Washington reduced to rubble in the Tidal Basin. All of his family is killed and he is captured and taken away as a refugee and a war exile to South America. There in that foreign land, his captors taunt him by saying, “Okay, now, sing us the ‘Star Spangled Banner’.”

As awful as that nightmare may seem, it is a nightmare that has been experienced not in dreams, but in reality over and over again in human history. If we're to understand our Old Testament lesson from the book of Ezekiel, we have to understand that Ezekiel in some ways was a lot like our imaginary young person in this nightmare story. Ezekiel grew up in Jerusalem, his father and grandfather and father and father before that were all priests in the temple in Jerusalem. He, too, was to be a priest and he went through all the training and just about the time that he was going to be ordained, the Babylonians swept through the Middle East. They captured Jerusalem and not only did they capture it, they destroyed Solomon's temple, burned David's palace to the ground, pretty much leveled the whole capital city, and killed thousands of people. Ezekiel, this young man, who was just ready to launch his adult life, just ready to see all of his training and all of his sense of calling come true to be a priest in the temple, just when everything was ready to begin for him, everything ended. His career gone, his loved ones murdered, his capital city and his holy temple was rubble on the ground and he was carried away to Babylon in exile. Then as an exile in Babylon, as a person who had always believed that God's calling for him was to be a priest in the temple, Ezekiel discovered there that his calling was not to be a priest in the temple, but to be a prophet to the exiles.

There came a vision to Ezekiel, the one we heard Roger read a bit ago, and he envisioned in this dream that he was called to go out into a valley. This valley was strewn with human bones, dry bones. In the dream it was said to him “Preach to the dry bones.” Even this dream, this vision, sounded almost like a taunt. This young person that had dreamed of himself to be a priest in the temple, now was told to be a preacher to dead bones! He was to say to them, “Come together.” Just when everything seemed hopeless, Ezekiel begins to see a vision of the revitalization, the reconstruction, the rebuilding of the people again.

Our New Testament lesson also is a lesson about hopelessness. It is the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. We are told in the story that Jesus and his disciples are away somewhere and his dear friends Mary, Martha and Lazarus are in trouble. The sisters send a message to Jesus saying that his friend, Lazarus, is ill, sick, he is desperately sick. The message urges him to come quickly in the hope that Jesus can lay his hands on Lazarus, as he had on so many others, and heal him and make him well again. Jesus starts back to Bethany where his friends live, but before he arrives, Lazarus dies.

Lazarus not only dies, he's been buried for four long days. Then Jesus arrives and we have that wonderful story of the two grieving sisters coming to meet him. They share in the grief and in that shortest of all verses in the Bible, it says that Jesus also wept with grief for his friend. Then Jesus goes to the tomb and calls forth Lazarus from the grave. The situation seemed utterly impossible, hopeless, and without any solution until Jesus comes. And then everything changes.

My friends, no matter how sweet your life may be today, all of us face occasions when it seems like we're in impossible and hopeless situations. Something happens to us and there seems no possibility that anything good will come of it. We, or someone we love, gets grim news from the physicians that the illness is terminal. We lose a loved one. We lose a job that we thought was just exactly the right job for us, the dream job and we lose it. We lose a marriage or child. Something happens in our lives and it seems like everything has come to an end and the situation itself is impossible to fix. It's a hopeless situation. We'd all like to go through life and never have those moments and perhaps, rarely, someone goes through life unscathed. Sometimes we are even told in the name of religion that if we just have the right kind of faith these kinds of things will never befall us, but they're wrong. Hopeless situations befall everyone. Every human being at one time or another has to face something that seems like the end of the world to them. Everyone of us at some place in our life has to come against those things over which we are powerless. We can't change them as much as we may hate them. They're there and we cannot escape.

When we face those kinds of situations in our lives, the gospel of Jesus Christ has a word for us. The gospel of Jesus Christ and the story of the scriptures tell us, first of all, that God's agenda is not our agenda. Oh, we'd like it to be. All God's children have an agenda. Don't we? All of us have some kind of hope, some kind of plan. All of us have an understanding of how things are supposed to be or at least how we want them to be. All God's children have an agenda in life. Ezekiel had an agenda. He was going to be a priest in the temple. Mary and Martha had an agenda. Jesus was going to come and rescue their brother from his illness. But God's agenda isn't always our agenda. If we are to deal with those times in life when everything is turning bad and sour and awful and nothing good can become of it, we must always remember that our dreams may not be quite the right dreams. Our agenda isn't necessarily what God is working out in the world.

It's a simple thing in a way. It's a simple recognition that ultimately we are not in charge. Our agendas are often self serving, short-sighted, distorted by our own ambitions or lack of perspective and we face situations in our life that seem hopeless and impossible and catastrophic. We need to always be reminding ourselves that our agenda, our hopes, our dreams are not necessarily those of God.

Second, we must always remember that in every situation, God is present bringing forth new possibilities. When Jerusalem fell and the temple was destroyed, all of Ezekiel's plans and hopes and dreams were destroyed. Even the hopes and dreams and integrity of his nation's seemed to be at an end, but God did not abandon him. God went with them into exile and with Ezekiel into exile and gave him a new identity, a new mission, a new life. The whole catastrophic situation turned out to be a part of a larger plan of God. When we face troubles bigger than we can face, we must never forget that God is at work often in ways that we cannot see.

So it was with Mary and Martha as they watched their brother die. They assumed that no way could

this turn out for good. They assumed that there was no way out of no way. But yet in Jesus Christ, there was a new beginning. How many times in your life has an end turned out to be a beginning? How many times in your life, when things seemed to be hopeless and despair was all around, did the problem, the difficulty, the loss, simply the open door to new learning and personal growth and opportunities that you didn't imagine before? How many times in life does exile turn into a new life? How many times have we've been reminded as we've lived our way through the Lenten season that even deaths have within them the hope of resurrection. God's agenda is not our agenda, but in every situation in life, God is at work bringing new possibility, new hope, new opportunities, even in the most hopeless and desperate situations. Thanks be to God. Amen.