

Is hope all that is left?

High St Uniting Church
Ezekiel 37: 1- 14



In the mythologies of Greece and Rome, Pandora is the first woman, sent to earth from the gods to be with the man created by the Titan, Prometheus. Some stories say that she is a gift to Prometheus and man, some stories say she is revenge on Prometheus for stealing fire from heaven for man. In both stories,

Pandora carried with her a jar filled with the blessings of the gods. Out of curiosity she opened the jar and all the blessings escaped. By the time she managed to slam back the lid of the jar, only hope remained inside. A story to say that, in the face of all the troubles in life, hope remains.

The people of Israel, defeated and dragged off to Babylon, possibly thought that they didn't even have that – the people felt their situation was hopeless. God had abandoned them, Jerusalem lay abandoned and destroyed, they were slaves and servants of a foreign overlord. Unlike Pandora, did they even have hope left? And so, Ezekiel is given a vision to convey to the people – can these bones live? You feel broken and dry and beyond help, just like the bones of the dead after a battle – the people in Babylon would possibly have imagined one of the valleys around Jerusalem, where their dead now lay – can you see a future? Can these bones live?

And Ezekiel doesn't say, "No! Impossible!" He doesn't say, "I don't think so, they are beyond help." He says, "O Lord God, you know." This is beyond me, beyond my stretch of hope, but it is not beyond you, God. You, the great mystery beyond us, you know.

In the gospel story for this week, we have the story of the raising of Lazarus from John's Gospel. Lazarus, dead and in the tomb for four days, and Jesus asks Martha if she believes that he can come alive again. And Martha, in the face of death and end and grief, says, "God knows." The great mystery beyond us and beyond our understanding of life and death, God knows.

The hope that Pandora left in the jar was a shapeless, directionless wish for an end to the sufferings of this life; plagues and illness, hate and spite, envy and revenge. Hence there is an alternate story of Pandora in which the jar, or box, contains all those evils and when she lifts the lid, only hope remains. But the hope that the story of the valley of dry bones brought to the people of Israel, the hope that is in Martha's heart at Lazarus's tomb, is directed at and underpinned by God. It's not that everything is gone from us and only hope is left, but that God is, and therefore in every situation, every possibility is open – Lord, you know.

When Paul wrote to the people at Corinth in that great passage that we all remember – the ode to love – he wrote that three things remain – faith, hope, and love. That gives the impression that faith and hope are separate things; however, they are intertwined. Hope in God requires faith in God, and faith in God produces hope, because your faith and hope are directed to a God in whom all things are possible. Ezekiel's vision of the valley of bones doesn't end with his statement of faith that God knows what is possible. He is given the

task to participate in the wonder of dry bones coming to life. Mortal, prophecy to the bones. Mortal, prophecy to the breath. It is not just his hope that is engaged, but God calls on his faith as well. Can you imagine the faith in that act! Speaking the word of God as a command while part of your brain is saying, "This is unbelievable and impossible! God may know this is possible, but why am I needed?"

When you read Jesus telling the disciples that they can have the faith to tell a tree to be uprooted and planted in the sea – admittedly extreme language - are you listening to the part of your brain that says, "This is unbelievable and impossible!", or are you listening to the part that has faith and hope intertwined around God?

We sit in this time in the history of the church, feeling dispirited by the declining numbers, the taunting memory of services full of people. We sit in our bodies getting older and frailer and seeing off so many friends and family in funerals. Are we a valley of dry bones, or a people captured by a vision of hope in a God who can do anything? Are we really dispirited, or do we hear the voice of command to the Spirit to breathe on us that we may live?

The hope that is in Ezekiel's vision of the valley, and the hope that is in the story of Jesus bringing Lazarus back from death, that hope remains. What we are called to do is match and intertwine our faith with that hope and take up the call to participate in the wonder of God bringing life to a world that feels dry and lifeless, bringing love to a world that is gripped by anger and grief, and bringing compassion to a world that celebrates assertiveness and indifference.

Our journey through Lent has been about recognising who we are before God and Christ and changing our outlook to recognise the Spirit and our need for a deeper faith connected to God through Christ. As we approach the great story of Christ's passion and resurrection, take up all our Lenten learning to see this as a story that has far more than a surface meaning, a story that calls for faith and hope to set our hearts on fire and open us to the winds of the Spirit blowing us out into the world. We worship the God of the possible, dry bones become living people, dead people come to life, old people have children, intractable problems find solutions, and dreams become reality. Let your faith grow to wind around God and wind around your hope and bring life to the impossible.