St Andrews sermon

Next month will be the 37th anniversary of the eruption of Mount St. Helens. That eruption blew away the top 1,314 feet of the mountain. An avalanche of rocks plugged the river valley at the base of the mountain and created a 23-square-mile zone of barren land. A 300-mile-an-hour lateral blast of hot air and debris flattened the surrounding forest. A cloud of ash climbed to 80,000 feet in 15 minutes and circled the globe in 15 days. Torrents of superheated air, gases and rocks—a mixture known as a pyroclastic flow—surged down the mountain's northern face for hours, destroying everything in its path. All told, the eruption blasted more than 230 square miles of forests, lakes, meadows and streams. It killed 57 people, making it the deadliest eruption in U.S. history, and millions of animals and plants. "Death is everywhere," the Oregonian newspaper reported. "The living are not welcome."

Yet, as those who may have followed this situation in ecological magazines may already know, life returned to that area in record time. An article in Smithsonian magazine on the 25th anniversary of the eruption, reported that more than 150 species of wildflowers, shrubs and trees had returned, with an average of ten new plant species gaining a foothold every year. In just decades, ecologists documented five conifer species, including western hemlock and Pacific silver fir, that aren't supposed to be there yet; according to standard ecological theory, those trees should sprout only after generations of other plants have improved the soil and provided some shade. It seems life can take hold even in the most desolate landscape, and in ways no scientist could have foreseen.

Sounds reminiscent of what our friend Elijah found in the valley of the dry bones, which represented the nation of Israel scattered in exile. Or like our friends Mary and Martha felt in their grief over the death of their beloved brother. Or perhaps like us, at times in our lives, when we’ve felt a severe loss and struggle to have hope for the future – anytime when life seems to present a desolate landscape. God can create anew in what we may feel is a hopeless situation, in ways no rational person could foresee.

Elie Wiesel, in his book, Night describes a time in the Auschwitz and Buchewald concentration camps when he died emotionally – when he lost all hope and faith with which he had grown up. Out of the ashes of the crematoria he writes:

*Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live. Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.*

But, we know that God didn’t leave Wiesel in that place. In his later book, Ani Maamin (which in Hebrew means, I believe with a perfect faith), Wiesel returns to the fundamental truths of his faith in God and finds a way to reconcile it with his horrible experiences. He writes of this belief in God as a Creator who is absolutely unique, eternal and omnipresent, in the arrival of a Messiah and in the resurrection of the dead. Despite the horrible trauma of the concentration camps, God created Wiesel anew. He led Wiesel through a time of questioning why God would allow such injustice and oppression and even of questioning whether God still existed, into a time of even stronger faith and a reclamation of life and joy.

Perhaps we’ve felt severe, hollow grief at the death of a loved one and find it difficult to continue to be joyful. Some experiences in our lives can even leave us feeling empty – just like those bones lying out exposed to the elements, devoid of any flesh. Sometimes these situations derive partly out of our own failings – we’ve gotten into a fight with our dearest friend and are too proud to say we’re sorry; but sometimes they are injustices committed against an innocent person or perhaps just a seemingly random trauma. These experiences, such as addictions, damaged relationships, times when we’ve been abused or severely hurt physically or emotionally can cause us to feel there is no hope – and can sometimes cause a part of ourselves to lose faith, to die emotionally.

We are a resurrection people, though, even in the middle of Lent we read these wonderful passages on the Resurrection. And the message for us is that the God who brought the dry bones to life and who raised Lazarus from the dead and Himself rose on the third day is always with us. If we let God, God will take us by the hand to that valley of dry bones, to that tomb of Lazarus, and to the empty tomb of Jesus to remind us that there is hope. God is still in the heavens. God still loves us. God can create a new heart in us. God can create goodness out of a bad situation. In record time, through the spirit of God, new life can grow out of even the most desolate emotional landscapes. And we like Lazarus will come forth to be unbound of those cloths that held us in death and to once more be free and joyful and fully alive in Christ.

Amen