

You Shall Live
Ezekiel 37:1-14
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First Central Congregational UCC
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“Ezekiel speaks to us as a person acquainted with grief. . . It is the depth of Ezekiel’s suffering and grief that gives him the credibility to talk about resurrection,” wrote the Rev. Jim Mitulski in his essay “Ezekiel Understands AIDS.”

Jim was the pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco during the height of the AIDS crisis, when he performed over 500 funerals some years, a statistic so staggering I wonder how Jim survived as a sane person.

Jim now ministers as an interim for UCC churches. He’s currently serving as the interim Senior Minister at the Congregational Church of Needham, Massachusetts. We are Facebook friends.

Someone once said I was a pioneer as an openly gay minister, and I disagreed with them. I’ve had it easy compared to people like Jim Mitulski who did good work while challenged by even greater stigma and did so in the midst of a nearly genocidal epidemic.

His essay is a profound interpretation and application of the ancient prophetic vision to a contemporary context. Jim wrote:

People with HIV understand what it means to be viewed as expendable. We understand the impermanence of the body and its fragility. We understand what it means to be so paralyzed by grief that we cease to care whether we live or die, whether we protect our health or the health of others, whether we take our medications on time or even at all. People with HIV understand what it means to feel ashamed, shut down, nihilistic, and reckless. We understand what it means to be fearful of giving or receiving love. We understand what it means to lose faith in God, in the community, and in our selves.

The HIV/AIDS experience is unique but it shares universal traits with other stigmatized experiences. Fear and ignorance lead to stigma and exclusion of people with various physical, mental, and developmental disabilities and illnesses.

On Friday we hosted the WISE for Mental Health Conference. WISE is an acronym for Welcoming, Inclusive, Supportive, and Engaged. In 2015 we covenanted to be a WISE congregation. Shortly afterwards we were asked to host this first WISE conference, and it was an honor to once again be a pioneer in our denomination.

Over sixty people gathered from around the country here on Friday. We learned practical steps for how a congregation can be more welcoming and inclusive. We heard the latest in suicide prevention and response. We also listened to deeply moving stories of how silence, shame, and stigma lead sometimes to death.

Do you ever feel defeated and lost? Are you ever nihilistic, overcome by fear, ashamed, stigmatized, and exiled? Ever feel cut off from other people, from God, from your true self?

In today's Bible story, God carries Ezekiel to the battlefield where the Babylonians defeated the Judean armies, and there Ezekiel sees the bodies of the slain, their bones having dried in the sun and the wind. God takes Ezekiel to the site of his greatest pain and there asks him to imagine restoration, new life, beginning again.

In the place of your greatest pain, can you dream? Can you imagine? Can you hope?

At the WISE Conference on Friday, one word I heard over and over again was *hope*. Hope because recovery does work for most people. Hope because families can find the support they need. Hope because more and more faith communities realize the need to be leaders in this area. Hope because the covenant God is with us.

God has made a promise to us, to you. In the place of your deepest pain, God is going to breathe. (Breathe with me, right now. A deep, refreshing breath.) God is going to breathe on you. "I will put my spirit within you," God says, "and you shall live."

Jim Mitulski wrote, "The book of Ezekiel is about an exiled community moving from devastation to resurrection." This story may begin with our darkest pain, but it ends with life.

The rabbis tell a humorous story about Ezekiel's vision. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was drinking from a cup made out of the skull of a defeated Hebrew at the very moment when Ezekiel had his vision. As Nebuchadnezzar went to take a drink, a fist emerged from the cup and knocked him in the jaw.

Through our pain, our grief, our anger, God is working to bring about our victory.

I received a great birthday present this year. On my birthday ABC debuted a miniseries that told part of the story of the modern gay rights movement. The series was entitled "When We Rise," a fantastic Easter title.

The show even included a UCC congregation—City of Refuge. My colleague, the Rev. Dr. Yvette Flunder, was portrayed by Phylicia Rashad. Gurl!

As was expected, so much of the series dealt with pain and conflict. HIV and AIDS. Exclusion by family and friends. Religious and political discrimination. Assassination, murder, and beating.

And yet. The story wasn't about those things. The story was about how a stigmatized, attacked, and infected people rose. They weren't defeated. They fought back, they organized, they advocated, they loved. They created something new and ultimately changed the world through their struggle.

I cried a lot watching the series. Plus, I was in shock. This story was now being told, not in some documentary on Logo that only a few people saw, but in an ABC miniseries. I never even dreamed that was a possibility, which goes to show my own lack of imagination.

One person portrayed in that series was Gilbert Baker, who died this weekend. In 1978 Gilbert Baker designed the rainbow flag as a symbol for gay rights, which has become a global symbol for welcome and inclusion. You can even get it on a liturgical stole.

I've always enjoyed that this symbol was taken from the Bible and from God's promise to keep us safe.

You see, I believe what Ezekiel is teaching us. When we feel cut off, defeated, a failure—God is with us, working through us, to help us rise again.

I believe this, because it is my own personal story. At the times of my own deep pain and struggle—whether the death of my father when I was sixteen or my experiences coming out of the closet as a gay man or our long effort to adopt a child—God has been with me. And when I've felt like a valley of dry bones with no more energy or hope, God's breath has always restored me to new life, to a new beginning.

So, take one more deep breath.

When you feel defeated and lost. When you are overcome by fear, ashamed, stigmatized, and exiled. When you feel cut off from other people, from God, and your true self. Feel the breath of God and be renewed. "I will put my spirit within you," God says, "and you shall live."