

“Remnant Resurrected!”
Sermon by Rev. Tom Warren
Peace United Church of Christ
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On Friday, just two days ago, we commemorated in this nation the 14th anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attack on our country. In the Miller-Warren family, our remembrance of this dark anniversary began the night before with a somewhat cryptic phone message. The message was from the principal of Northwest High School. The message amounted to an acknowledgement that there had been a threat of violence made against the school and that the local authorities had been informed of the threat and that they were looking into it. Well, the social media effect kicked in, and soon it was common knowledge that some parents were keeping their kids home from school Friday just in case. Kim and I decided, with much reluctance, to keep Daniel home from school, and we left him home with his cell phone and a list of chores.

On my way into church Friday morning, I decided to drive by Northwest High School to see what was up and, sure enough, there were perhaps five or six police cars stationed around the school property. As we know, there was no violence at Northwest on Friday but, driving past the school that morning, I was reminded that we are no longer the safe, insulated nation that we once thought we were. We are threatened both internally with our fraying social order and externally. Our perceptions and depths of these fears are very real, and it is perception that really matters because perception is what motivates our actions. So, it is under these strange circumstances that we celebrate Rally Day.

Rally Day had its origin around the turn of the century, the 20th century, and has always been a Sunday to welcome folks back from summer vacations, to gear up the Sunday School classes and, in general, to get ready to recommit to the business of the fall season.

Marion Lawrence, a congregational author, wrote a book in 1905 called “How to Conduct A Sunday School”. We were more practical back then. She wrote in this book that Rally Day was “one of the happiest days of the year with strong, vigorous music and perhaps an outside speaker” or, at least, an outside singer. Well, in the last 110 years our world has changed quite a bit. In the last 50 years, the church has changed quite a bit. In the last 14 years since 9/11, America has changed quite a bit. So, with all that change, how should Rally Day be celebrated and, more importantly, how do we understand ourselves and the church in this new day and time?

In our scripture reading this morning from Ezekiel, we encountered a text that is typically trodden out on Easter morning. Because it is read on Easter morning, the Valley of Dry Bones story is subsumed under the joy of the resurrection. It is turned into a victory story. We are no longer dead and Christ has risen is the way that we hear this story, but the Ezekiel 37 passage about the Valley of Dry Bones is really about how Israel would survive as a remnant community. How would Israel live as a people who had just survived a social catastrophe? Ezekiel, this prophet of God, is charged with speaking a prophetic word to a people whose world has been turned upside down, whose world was once certain and predictable and protected and was now vulnerable, uncertain and perhaps unprotected.

Ezekiel, of course, was speaking to those Israelites who lived in the wake of the Babylonian obstruction of 587 B.C. This was their “9/11”, when Babylon came from the north and destroyed the nation, and on that day of destruction, the four pillars of divine promise upon which the Israelites rested their faith were destroyed. These four pillars included first that the Israelites understood that they were God’s chosen people. They would be protected and blessed forevermore because they were God’s chosen people.

The second pillar was their concept that they were on holy land that was granted to them by the Holy God. God owned the land. Their presence was God's will, and God would protect their land from outside threats.

The third pillar was about Jerusalem. They believed that Jerusalem was the holy city where the dynasty of King David would reign forever, and ever and ever.

Last, that fourth pillar was the fact that Jerusalem was the location of Solomon's Temple, where it was believed that God resided.

The Israelites believed that nothing could happen to them until it did. It was on that day in 587 when all that was left was a remnant community—the survivors of a catastrophe to whom Ezekiel would speak. Ezekiel would ask this community, now a remnant community, and challenge them to ask the question and to answer the questions “Can these bones live? Is there a future for us?” It is the question of the church. It is the question most of us don't want to go near, and I think that clergy who don't go near the question are in denial, so we deal with that question, believing that it is THE question that God is asking us to answer.

Now, once a month, as just happened this past Wednesday, I sit in with a group of UCC pastors to talk about our ministries, and the conversation, peppered though it is with all kinds of “cheesy” pastoral humor, is often informed by an unacknowledged spirit of death. The conversation always ends up in the same place of the death of our churches, the death of our communities, the death of our nation, the death of what was and, because we are only able to see the future through the lens of a glorious past, we never quite get to the promise of our future as a remnant community, but it is the question that hangs over our heads. When you are no longer the “big man on campus”, is there a future to rally for?

So it was in 1950, no less, that the theologian, J. C. Campbell pointed out that, in the Bible, the remnants of Israel actually had much to rally for. As a remnant community, Israel began to understand themselves differently. After all, they had survived that catastrophe and they began to understand themselves first as a beloved, spared remnant of God, who were the sole legitimate carriers of the old traditions of Israel. They had come through a rough time, and now they had this responsibility of God's beloved remnant to carry on those old traditions and keep them alive, so they stood up straight and said we have this responsibility to keep the traditions alive. With that responsibility, they began to develop this new self-understanding as a quite unique, different and blessed community. We are not just survivors. We are not just a remnant. We are not just the responsibility holders. We are unique and blessed. We are special. This community came to understand itself to be specifically called to live lives of purity and obedience in response to the moral confusion and idolatry which surrounded them.

So, that remnant community of Israel began to see themselves as beloved, unique, blessed and specifically called to model God's righteousness in a fallen foreign world and to invite others to join them. This was Israel as a remnant community.

Amos Wilder is an American poet. He was a congregational minister and a Professor of Theology. He wrote a poem in 1965 called “A Hard Death”. It is a long and disturbing poem, but these three lines of this poem are critical. He wrote: “Accept no mitigation, but be instructed at the null point. The zero hour breeds new algebra”. In poetic prose, Amos Wilder brings to the surface the truth of faith—that, in those zero hours of our lives, in those moments when it all seems lost, when the cancer diagnosis has been received, when the child is found dead, when the spouse passes away, when the towers fall to the ground, when the impossibilities seem overwhelming, in the zero hour God stirs something new. That is the story of the biblical faith, that when it is the darkest in our lives, God is starting something new. Good Friday breeds Easter Sunday. Dead bones get up and dance. Newness comes when we are least prepared to receive it.

So, here we are on Rally Day. It is a leftover tradition from a day gone by, when the churches overflowed, but here we are. It is the day that Marion Lawrence said should be one of the happiest days of the year, and that it can be. This can be that zero hour. Zero hours are filled, impregnated with possibilities if we imagine and believe that new algebra is taking shape, if we begin to listen and look for God's new stirrings in the midst of an old shell, if we remain open to the promise that bones will dance again into a new and different future, and if we believe that God is still at work in our lives, that there is, indeed, much to look forward to.

It was nearly 3000 years ago that God asked Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" In 2015, this question is being asked again. The answer is yes. The answer is yes if we listen and look for the new stirrings that God has in store for us. The answer is yes if we think that the future looks different and the possibilities are endless. The answer is yes if we trust and hold onto one another and open that welcome mat, open that front door as wide as we can, inviting people into the gospel of life, in the midst of a culture that is lost. It is a time of great promise even at the zero hour. Let us say yes to God. Thanks be to God. Amen.