

Green Hill Presbyterian Church  
“Out of the Depths”  
Thomas G. Speers, III  
Lent 5—April 2, 2017

Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; John 11:1-45

One of my favorite authors is Theodore Geisel, better known as Dr. Seuss. I love his drawings and the way he makes up words and creatures from Plain-Belly Sneetches to Loraxes and turtles named Yertle. I love the way he teaches: Horton discovers that *a person's a person no matter how small*. The Grinch questions *What if Christmas, doesn't come from a store. What if Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!* Perhaps most of all, I love that he is honest and not afraid to write about both good times and difficult times. Our lives are not always joyous and wonderful. Children know that just as well as adults. That is particularly true in his book, *Oh the Places You'll Go!* It begins filled with great optimism and expectation: *Congratulations! Today is your day. You're off to great places! You're off and away! You have brains in your head. You have feet in your shoes. You can steer yourself any direction you choose....Oh! The places you'll go! You'll be on your way up! You'll be seeing great sights! You'll join the high fliers who soar to high heights. You won't lag behind, because you'll have the speed. You'll pass the whole gang and you'll soon take the lead. Wherever you fly, you'll be the best of the best. Wherever you go, you will top all the rest. Except....Here's the honesty: Except when you don't. Because sometimes you won't. I'm sorry to say so but, sadly, it's true that Bang-ups and Hang-ups can happen to you. You can get all hung up in a prickly perch. And your gang will fly on. You'll be left in a lurch. You'll come down from the Lurch with an unpleasant bump. And the chances are, then, that you'll be in a slump. And when you're in a slump, you're not in for much fun. Un-slumping yourself is not easily done.<sup>1</sup>*

Dr. Seuss is willing both to get totally carried away with excitement and joy and to speak the truth that *Bang-ups and Hang-ups* can happen to every one of us. Dr. Seuss is a little bit like the psalms this way. We've got psalms that are full of joy and praise and excitement, and we also have psalms like our psalm today, where we cry out from the depths. This season of Lent is a time to recognize the depths that we all encounter. Being part of the community of faith does not save us from encountering those depths as most of us know and the last thing that anyone of us needs to hear when we are in the depths is that there must be something wrong with us or with our faith or we wouldn't be there. Read through the stories of Scripture and you'll find lots of deeply faithful people who found themselves, just the same, down in the depths. Perhaps the most powerful example of that is Jesus himself who cried out from the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord hear my voice.”

In our readings today, there are two important lessons for us to remember in those times of *Lurch* and *Slump*, those times when we are in the depths. The first can be found in the story of Jesus and Lazarus in John's gospel. One friend of mine suggests that the two most powerful words in all of Scripture are to be found in this story and the words are simply: *Jesus wept*. When faced with the death of his friend, the grief of Martha and Mary and their friends, Jesus is overcome with emotion and he begins to weep. Here is the person that John's gospel goes out of its way to portray as the Son of God, with the power to perform great signs and wonders, who is going to call Lazarus out and unbind him, and he begins to weep. This is a powerful word for all of us, when we are down in the depths: contrary to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Seuss, *Oh, the Places You'll Go!* © Random House 1990

suggestion of one of our hymns, when we walk that lonesome valley, we *don't* ever have to walk it by ourselves. Jesus walks with us, ready to weep with us and ready to call us out from the depths, unbinding us that we might live again.

The other lesson for us is to be found in the story of the dry bones in Ezekiel. The story was written for the people of Israel in their time of exile, their time of being down in the depths. They had been taken away from their homes into Babylon. Although they were given a great amount of freedom in this foreign land, still it wasn't home. They weren't where they wanted to be or where they were supposed to be; where they were, they couldn't worship God. They were in the lurch.

Craig Barnes, has said that "often when people's lives have been interrupted by a great tragedy, they stop coming to worship. I used to think this was because they were embarrassed by their loss of a loved one, job or health. But I've discovered that more often the reason people stop worshipping is that they have lost their vision of God. To stand in worship beside so many who are singing praise to the Lord just creates too much existential contradiction. It's a tragic irony of the soul that in the times we most need to worship, we find it most difficult.

"Like the exiles in Babylon, we try to numb the spiritual pain by making life more comfortable. We work hard. We collect a lot of things. We buy houses, plant our roots, live quietly and try to make Babylon as nice as we can. But however nicely we decorate it, Babylon is still not our home. And the day we deaden our longing for God is the day we spiritually die. Then the rest of us begins to slowly die, from the inside out.

"Eventually," Barnes says, "things got so cozy for the Hebrew exiles that even after they were encouraged to go to Jerusalem most of them didn't want to go back. The old dream of living in the Lord's presence had died buried under piles and piles of coping devices."<sup>2</sup> That is the time that God starts something. When we've given up on the world as we hoped it would be, and settled in for the world as it is, mean, uncaring, and broken, winner take all, that's when God shows us an incredible vision. God takes Ezekiel into a valley filled with dry bones, bones representing the people of Israel. They are in such pain that all they can say is: "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." That is they cry of an exiled people. That's what it is to be in a slump. But God won't leave them there. God won't leave us there in the depths. God comes to us and calls us out, giving us hope, a hope which Barnes says "brings us back to life. Hope rises up from our bones, and chooses to believe in spite of how it is." When we are in the depths, not only is God in Christ present with us, sharing our pain, weeping with us, but God also is at work breathing a new spirit into our lives. God knows what we feel down in the depths: this is not the way it is supposed to be. God will yet raise us up. God will cause breath to enter you and you will live. Down in the depths, God is at work, bringing to life even our most dried up parts. Take note that it is God who is doing the work here. Sometimes when people are way down in the depths, we have a tendency to tell them to pull themselves together. We mean well, but the fact is that often they can't. The mechanism they used to pull themselves together is broken now. This lesson is not about self-help; it isn't saying pull yourself up. Instead it proclaims that God will pull you up.

We are invited today, as Barnes puts it, to "take our stand beside Ezekiel and proclaim our hope to the dry bones. "Thus, says the Lord, I will cause breath to enter you

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<sup>2</sup> Craig Barnes, Resurrected Hopes, © Christian Century February 27, 2002

and you shall live! You who gave up hope, who gave up dreaming--who have settled for a comfortably routine life of work, bills and dirty laundry. You who think your best years are behind you. You who think the Lord God has forgotten all about your little life.

“To you, we say, ‘Arise!’ Arise from the heap of discarded dreams. Arise to discover that the Holy Spirit is breathing life back into you. Arise to live with magnificent hope! Because the world is dying for you to believe God is not done.”<sup>3</sup>

So when you cry out from the depths, when you find *hang-ups* and *bang-ups* have left you in a *Lurch*, when you find yourself in a *slump which is not fun, because un-slumping yourself is not easily done*, remember just the same that by the power of God, today still is your day. *You're off to great places! You're off and away* for God will put God's Spirit within you and you will live.

Let us pray: Be with us dear God when we are in the depths; hear our cry, and by the power of your Holy Spirit, breathe new life into our dried up bones. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.