

## **Re-imagining Social Holiness; Sustaining Hope**

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### **Introduction**

President of the Methodist Conference; Secretary of the Methodist Conference; Members of the Connexional Executive and all people called Methodist, I greet you all this morning in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, Amen. Conference, yesterday I sought to expound what it means to re-imagine Social Holiness in the context of Southern Africa in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today I am focusing on the biblical text. We agree members of Conference, that we need to re-imagine Social Holiness so that we sustain Hope and Healing. This second installment of Bible Study focuses on the text whilst illuminating Hope and Healing. The second part of our Conference theme talks about sustaining Hope and Healing. Sustaining something means sustaining something that already exists. It means to reify or to strengthen something that is there. Hope is there; Healing is there; Hope is alive; it is a living Hope that as the Presiding Bishop charged on Thursday allows us to say even in the midst of crisis, “Praise be to God”<sup>1</sup>. Hope has been effected; Hope and Healing exist, but they need to be sustained. They need to be sustained because the promises are being forgotten.

### **Israel as an alternative Community**

The vision of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa is of a Christ-healed Africa for the healing of the nations. Thus, as this healing happens at a particular rate, Social Holiness must be re-imagined so that Hope and Healing can be sustained. Hope and Healing can be sustained by a counter-cultural community, an alternative community that offers Hope and Healing to Africa and the nations. This alternative community we find in the presence of Egypt, when Jacob and some seventy-odd people travel to Egypt following Jacob’s last born son Joseph. It is this small community of Hebrews with which God decides to create an alternative community with an alternative consciousness fueled by prophetic imagination. A community that would live to worship God. This small alternative community grows into a large community with a consciousness that even though they are in Egypt, they are not of Egypt. They are in this world, but not of this world.<sup>2</sup> This alternative community of Hebrews knows that even though Joseph is in the palace, in the heart of empire, his people are in the margins.

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<sup>1</sup> MCSA Presiding Bishop’s Address to Conference. 09 September 2021: St. James Methodist Society, Kimberley.

<sup>2</sup> John 17:16

This alternative community grows so much that after Joseph died, there arose a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph. This Pharaoh (this empire) saw the alternative community as a threat to imperial Egypt. If this alternative community rises against injustice and challenge empire, then empire can no longer climb on the backs of the people on his quest to power and economic expansion. God sees the suffering of this alternative community and says “I have heard the cry of my people and I have come down to save them”. Conference, the Old Testament is filled with narratives of this alternative community as a movement.

Moving from one place to the other for forty years, trying to shape itself. This alternative community is led by Moses, then Joshua, then the judges, and later they demand a king. The spirit of this alternative community breaks when Samuel anoints for them a king. The king assumes power and begins to take from the people, the spirit of egalitarianism and demands their land, their agricultural produce, their money. This community is defined in numerous ways, but above all it is defined by a grace that will not let them go. That even as they move away from God, God refuses to let them go, because the world is better off with an alternative community with an alternative consciousness, than without one. The world needs an alternative community that will speak truth to power. The world needs an alternative community that will offer Hope and Healing to Africa and the nations.

### **Israel in Babylon**

And so, after a long history of the alternative community having a monarchy and the later division of the monarchy, they find themselves exiled in Babylon. After the destructions of the Assyrian domination, the Egyptian domination and their control of “the known world”, Babylon comes into power and conquers Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel. The major prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophecy to empire that doom is coming. They tell truth to power and tell empire that Judah will fall, and Jerusalem will be destroyed. Empire refuses to listen to the prophetic voice, just as empire often does. Empire refuses to listen just like a particular liberation party refused to listen to Archbishop Desmond Tutu when he said this empire is on a downward trajectory and it will ultimately fall. When the prophetic voice says empire will fall, it does not matter under whose leadership empire will be when it falls. When it is time for empire to fall, empire will fall. And so, in 597 BCE Judah is conquered by Babylon (Bright, 1960:323).

Under the reign of Jehoiakin, Judah sided with Egypt, whilst Jeohiakin was a vassal king of Neco of Egypt (Bright, 1960:326). Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon marched against Egypt and retreated when he was unable to defeat Neco (Bright, 1960:326). Because of this retreat, Jehoiakim, king of Judah rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (Bright, 1960:326). In 598, Nebuchadnezzar marched into Judah and conquered it and in that battle Jehoiakim was killed, leaving his son Jehoiachin to take the throne, and within three months he surrendered power to Nebuchadnezzar (Young, 1949; Bright, 1960; Oesterley & Robinson, 1961). The pact his father had made with imperial Egypt did not help the nation. The king, the queen mother, the high officials and the leading citizens were taken to Babylon and the king's uncle Zedekiah was installed as ruler in Jerusalem (Bright, 1960:327). John Bright asserts (1960:327):

One would have expected the experiences of 598-597 BCE to have left Judah, for the moment at least, chastened and docile. But nothing of the sort! Zedekiah's reign (597-587) saw nothing but continual agitation and sedition till the nation, seemingly bent on destroying itself, finally succeeded in bringing the roof down on its head. Within ten short years the end had come forever.

At the hands of kings who did not care about the nations but their own aspirations of power, Judah fell until she could fall no lower. Amongst the people taken into exile to Babylon is a 20% priest by the name of Ezekiel.<sup>3</sup> In the fourth month of the fifth year of exile, whilst staying at Tel Abib on the banks of the river Chebar in Babylon, God called Ezekiel to prophecy (Young, 1949:244; Oesterley & Robinson: 1961). Ezekiel tells us in chapter 1:1 that in his thirtieth year (whilst still 20%), whilst he was amongst the exiles in the River Chebar, the heavens were opened, and he saw visions of God and the hand of the Lord was upon him.

### **Maintaining the Alternative Community**

There are two groups of people here: the people that have been taken into exile are those close to empire. It is the king, the queen mother, the officials, their helpers and caretakers and some other people. The main portion of the community is left behind in Jerusalem. Thus, the center is in Babylon and the margins are in Jerusalem. The people in exile are allowed to gather and speak to each other and Ezekiel creates a public space for theologizing whilst in

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<sup>3</sup> In Hebrew the prophet's name is yehezeqe'l which means "God strengthens" (Young, 1949:240).

exile (Mein, 2002:66-67). The young Ezekiel stands to prophecy to the alternative communities both in exile and back at home in Jerusalem. He joins Isaiah and Jeremiah in maintaining the faith of Israel. Ezekiel prophesies in dark times. He prophesizes to say to the people of Israel: God does not delight even in the death of the wicked, but offers deliverance to all people (Young, 1949:244). In the dark times of Israel, Ezekiel begins to re-imagine a new Israel. Ezekiel stands at a time of hopelessness and says “one day Israel will be re-gathered into her own land; will have one king and there will be true worship of the Lord, and the re-imagined city will be called *Jehovah Shammah*: The Lord is there” (Young, 1949:244).

Dark times are not new, nor are they rare in history. Dark times are not merely times of horror, but times of confusion in which theory no longer helps us to act and where traditional forms of explanation no longer explain anything, as events overturn theory (Hiebel, 2019:1). Dark times disrupt our own limited knowledge of life as we know it. Dark times enter our lives and introduce a disease that no one knows about. As scientists think they have the hang of it, dark times come again and introduce something else! Critical times become moments for listening to God and for seeking God’s vision most intently; crises call for a re-vision, for hearing and seeing anew (Dube, 2001: 617).

### **Hope and Healing**

Ezekiel begins his prophetic re-imagination at a time when Israel is at a crossroads. It is a dark time. When you read Ezekiel, you will realize that Ezekiel only uses the word Hope to contrast it with something else. Ezekiel uses the word Hope to show us what hope is not. In the entire book there are only two cases where Ezekiel uses the word Hope together with a verb. The first time is in 19:5 where he says, “when she saw that she was thwarted, that her hope was lost, she took another of her cubs and made him a young lion” and the second time is in 37:11 where he says “Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely’”. But in all other instances in his book, Ezekiel uses the term Hope to describe what hope is not. In 13:1-16 he shows that hope is not blind optimism (Hiebel, 2019) where Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to tell the prophets of Israel to stop lying to the nation and giving them false hope. In 20:1-44 he shows us that Hope is not history (Hiebel, 2019) when Yahweh instructs Ezekiel to tell Israel that Yahweh’s mighty acts do not end with history. And in 37:1-14 (where we have read), he proves to us that Hope can stand against despair (Hiebel, 2019).

We see in the book of Ezekiel, that Ezekiel had to live through the very disaster he prophesied, experiencing loss and trauma first-hand. As a survivor among survivors, and in an environment of increasing hopelessness, the Ezekiel that was the pessimist that announced doom and gloom, was forced to address the question of whether there was light at the end of the tunnel: the question of Hope and Healing (Hiebel, 2019:6). From chapter 34 to chapter 48 of the book of Ezekiel we have what Old Testament scholars call the oracles of salvation or the texts of Hope. Hope for Ezekiel is never about avoiding a catastrophe, Hope for Ezekiel is what emerges after the catastrophe (Hiebel, 2019:6). It is not blind optimism that promises prosperity when there is no prosperity, but it is fundamental hope that acknowledges the realities of failure and defeat but refuses to give up in the face of failure and defeat.

### **Hopelessness**

At a time of hopelessness in the life of the alternative community, Ezekiel stands at the public place of gathering in the land of Babylon to offer a Public Theology of Hope and Healing. It is in Ezekiel's thirtieth year, his wife died five years ago on the day that Nebuchadnezzar swept in and took Judah. It is five years later. The people in exile have received word from back home in Jerusalem when the second batch of the exiled people came in that the Temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. It is a dark time; it is a time of hopelessness. The unthinkable has happened and God has done nothing about it. The state of hopelessness in the alternative community is best described by the 137<sup>th</sup> psalmist:

*By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?*

Ezekiel stands and says to the alternative community: The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. The hand of the Lord was upon Ezekiel and the Spirit of the Lord transported him to the valley of dry bones. The Spirit or רוח *rwh*<sup>4</sup> of the Lord takes Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones. The valley of the dry bones is significant because in chapter three verse

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<sup>4</sup> Hebrew word for Spirit

twenty-two, the Lord after calling Ezekiel says to him: “Then the hand of the LORD was upon me there; and he said to me, Rise up, go out into the valley, and there I will speak with you.”. It is a valley in exile. It is a place of death. The valley is a place of dislocation. Ezekiel is dislocated from Jerusalem to Babylon at the banks of the River Chebar; then he is further dislocated from the River Chebar to a valley of dry bones.

The valley is a place of isolation: Ezekiel is transported by the  $\text{רוח}$  alone to the valley of dry bones. He is called to prophesy from a position of death and disappointment. He says the  $\text{רוח}$  took me back and forth around the valley, so that I can see how bad the situation is. A church that does not prophesy cannot see what the situation is. A church that does not allow the  $\text{רוח}$  to move back and forth cannot see how dry the bones of the people are. Ezekiel says the bones were (1) very many and (2) very dry. They are many because they represent the centuries of the oppression of Israel. They are many because empire after empire have plunged Israel to total destruction. The bones in the valley of Southern Africa are many because empire after empire has come for the ruins of Africa. First they came for the diamonds in Botswana; then they came for the gold in South Africa; then they came for the platinum. The bones are many in the valley.

Ezekiel says the bones were dry. They are dry because there is nothing left in them. They are dry because empire has killed their spirits; they are dry because empire first came for the spirit of the people, then it came for the flesh; then for the sinews until there was nothing left and the bones were left very dry. The bones are very dry because death is the order of the day: it is death in all its dreadfulness and irrevocability, not a flicker of life is left (Mare, 2018:565). The bones lying in the valley suggests that they are bones of corpses who been denied the dignity of an appropriate burial (Mare, 2018:565). The bones are very dry because they have been lying in the valley for a long time.

God asks Ezekiel: Son of man, can these bones live? What a preposterous question! Imagining Hope, Life and Healing for these bones is to deny the truth. In fact, to think that they could rise again would be outrageously absurd! These bones are disjointed! All life has been removed from them! The Old Testament has examples of people being brought back to life: In 1 Kings 17 Elijah brings back to life the son of a widow; In 2 Kings 4 Elisha brings back to life the son of the Shunammite, but none of these people had died for as long as these bones had died. As Yahweh asks this question, Ezekiel answers: Only you Sovereign Lord

knows. It is as if Ezekiel says to Yahweh: “with people it is impossible, but with you it is possible!”<sup>5</sup> Ezekiel, seeing death all over, responds to God, only you Lord knows. And God says to Ezekiel, God says to the alternative community: Prophecy son of man, Prophecy that these bones may come to life, for these are the people of Israel.

They say our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are cut off completely. They say our hope is lost because they have hoped and hoped, but nothing has come of their hope. They say our hope is lost because regardless of the promises that have been made to them, nothing has come to fruition, but instead they fall deeper and deeper into poverty and marginalisation. They say our hope is lost because like the woman that Jesus meets in Mark chapter 5, she has been to many many doctors, but her bleeding has kept on going for over twelve years. Her hope is lost because the doctors she has consulted have not helped her and she just keeps on getting worse and worse. They say our hope is lost because Empire made promises in 1994, then in 1999; then in 2004; then in 2009; then in 2014; then in 2019, but instead of the situation getting better, it keeps on getting worse. They say we are cut off, our hope is lost because in Namibia; in Mocambique; in eSwatini; in the countries of the connexion, there is just permanent presence of rampant corruption that breaks the backs of the poor and the underclass. Their hope is lost!

This passage has images of hearing and seeing. There are sights and sounds in this passage as the prophet engages in re-imagining Social Holiness to sustain Hope and Healing. There are points of hearing and seeing between the Yahweh, the prophet Ezekiel, the bones in the valley and the people that Ezekiel is addressing. In verses 1 and 2 Ezekiel **sees** as he is placed in the valley of dry bones. In verses 3-6 Ezekiel **hears** what Yahweh says to him. In verse 7 it is now the dry bones that **hear** what Ezekiel says to them. In verse 8 Ezekiel **sees** the flesh and skin covering the dry skeletons. In verse 9 Ezekiel **hears** the word of Yahweh. In verse 10 the Spirit **hears** the prophetic voice of Ezekiel and then **hears** the rattling of the dry bones as they come together. The passage then ends with Ezekiel **hearing** the word of Yahweh. Imagine or re-imagine the scene in Ezekiel 37: A place of theologizing.

To make sure that Ezekiel and his hears grasp the full force of the scene, Yahweh takes Ezekiel around and throughout the heaps and heaps of the bones in the valley. As Ezekiel

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew 19:26

walks about this valley of death he says it was full of very many bones and they were very dry. Ezekiel uses the word: Behold there were bones. In dreams and visions, the word behold or look or gaze invites the hearers to remove themselves from their present location and travel to another land, time and context and then linger on and evaluate with a deep focus. As Ezekiel calls on his hearers to behold the scene, the hearers notice three things: (1) The number of bones, (2) the bones are unburied and scattered around the valley, and (3) the extreme dryness of the bones. Conference, please travel with me to Tel Abib on the banks of the River in the valley of death. Travel with me to a far distant land in a far distant historical time and re-imagine with me a valley full of dry bones. Travel with me conference to a valley of hopelessness. Travel with me to a valley and let us join Ezekiel as he remembers the words of Psalm 23: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil. Travel with me conference as we try to re-imagine Social Holiness to sustain Hope and Healing.

At this time, things are no better for the people of Israel, for the people of Africa. As Jurgen Moltman (2012: 460) puts it: “the silent spring and the threatening climate catastrophe are indictments enough. Anyone who hears the echo of the cry of the Christ dying on the cross, hears today the cry out of the depths of God-forsakenness from the masses of the poor.” The scene that Ezekiel paints is a horrifying picture of death; it is a blunt description of the brutality, savagery and horror of death. In this passage Ezekiel captures the finality and the irreversible by describing the bones as very dry. Clearly death had viciously and ruthlessly erased their identity; their strength; their robustness; their vigour. All that remained was extreme dryness. All that remained was utter hopelessness and despair. Social Holiness must be re-imagined! Hope and Healing need to be sustained!

Conference, I want to pick up two things as I pose a challenge to conference to re-imagine Social Holiness, to sustain hope and healing.

### **The Prophetic Role of the Church**

Firstly, we read in the Old Testament that when prophets participate in God’s ministry, they are usually passive. They come with vision and tell the people what God says and then stand at a certain position as God does the doing. But in this instance, God tells the prophet Ezekiel what to do. This passage of scripture introduces us to the God who invites us to participate in the healing and hope-giving ministry. Step-by-step God tells Ezekiel what to do and how to do



it. God calls on Ezekiel to re-imagine an alternative community. God calls on the Church to re-imagine an alternative community. The Church is called to a prophetic role. She is called to prophesy in a time of crisis and offer Hope and Healing.

Robert Vosloo (2019) holds that the Church is called to exercise prophetic imagination. Prophetic imagination requires identification with our contemporary world in its crisis and hope. A true contemporary Church helps us to see our time in a more realistic way – not only its light, but also its darkness. According to Vosloo (2019), prophetic witness is imaginative. It helps us to see better and in the process, it is hope giving. This hope is not cheap optimism, but a hope born from lament. Emmanuel Katongole (2017) asserts that the practice of lament is the work of hope. We lament because there is a lot going wrong, and our tears and our loud wailing are made in the hope of improvement. Jesus lamented in hope. When he arrived in Jerusalem and he saw the city, he wept. Jesus wept, in hope. He applied prophetic imagination by evaluating the reality of the situation in Jerusalem. A Church that practices prophetic imagination does not see things from the surface, but she evaluates the situation deeper than what the eye can see.

A Church that practices prophetic imagination evaluates what happens deep in the soul of a community and when she sees the pain and sorrow of the nation, she laments and speaks truth to the community leaders. A Church that practices prophetic imagination does not get carried away by service delivery protests; she does not get carried away by protests that demand the delivery of a political leader; nor does she get carried away by protests that demand the fall of an absolute monarch; but she evaluates what is happening behind the protests and sees that a nation that has not healed from its past cannot find peace. An authentic prophetic Church that practices prophetic imagination is able to hear deep when a government for the people by the people squanders money they have put aside for the relief of the socio-economic impact of Covid-19 and then laments: “Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then is there no healing for the wound of my people?”

The prophetic imagination must provide hope by pointing to new realities that can be trusted and depended upon. This is an invitation to join the struggle against injustice that must “end with us”; it is an invitation to a new conversation with the future (Boesak, 2017: 197). It is a conversation that pushes theology to the edge (Boesak, 2017:197). It is a theology of the margins; a theology that speaks from the peripheries. It speaks from the peripheries because it

is a theology born of the people in the margins. When theology moves from the academia to the margins of society, it is able to speak to the lived realities of the people and thus able to create an alternative community with a counter-culture.

### **The Bones Come back to life**

Secondly, Ezekiel says, as I was prophesying; as I stood with the alternative community; as I was re-imagining Social Holiness; as I was prophesying the sustaining of Hope and Healing, there was a rattling sound, as the bones came together. Then I continued to prophesy and flesh came upon the bones, and the sinews came upon the flesh, for healing was beginning to occur in the valley of dry bones. And as I prophesied more, more things continued to happen. Notice that the prophet does not prophesy once and then stops. The ministry of prophetic imagination is a continuous ministry, it does not end with the elections in 1994! It does not end with the removal of Zuma from office. It must continue to move even with Ramaphosa. The ministry of prophetic imagination does not end with the tyranny of General Ian Kgama, it must continue as a movement in the time of Mokgweetsi Masisi. The ministry of prophetic imagination cannot end with Tom Tabane, but must continue to speak truth to Majoro!

Hope requires a re-imagining of possibilities. In order to spark Hope over the experience of physical and metaphorical death, Ezekiel demonstrates that new life is possible, that death, real as it may be, does not have the last word. And as flesh and sinews came upon the bones, but they were just corpses, because the Spirit was not in them. Healing was happening, but it needed to be sustained. And I prophesied to the Spirit: Come from the four winds, O רוח, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the רוח came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. As they rose up, they needed Hope.

They were now a people needed to be assured that after Healing comes Hope. The bones had flesh; the bones had sinews; the bones had the Spirit. After a long chronological time had wiped the bones off, it was not time for the Kairos, God’s appointed time. And from the phoenix rises from the ashes, the people arose and they were a great army. They rose from the valley with Healing in their bodies and with Hope in their hearts. They rise with renewed vision that speaks to the communities falling into despair, as in the words of Maya Angelou:

**You may write me down in history; With your bitter, twisted lies; You may trod me in the very dirt; But still, like dust, I'll rise.**

**Just like moons and like suns, With the certainty of tides, Just like hopes springing high, Still I'll rise.**

**You may shoot me with your words; You may cut me with your eyes; You may kill me with your hatefulness; But still, like air, I'll rise.**

**Out of the huts of history's shame, I rise Up from a past that's rooted in pain, I rise. I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide, Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.**

**Leaving behind nights of terror and fear, I rise Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear, I rise; Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave, I am the dream and the hope of the slave.**

**I rise; I rise; I rise... Thank you**

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