

Fifth Sunday in Lent – April 6, 2014
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Ezekiel 37:1 - 14 (NIV)

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’” ⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come breath from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army. ¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’” ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’”

Dry Bones

Ezekiel cried, "Dem dry bones!"
"Oh, hear the word of the Lord."

The foot bone connected to the leg bone,
The leg bone connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone connected to the back bone,
The back bone connected to the neck bone,
The neck bone connected to the head bone,
Oh, hear the word of the Lord!

Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk aroun'
Dem bones, dem bones, gonna walk aroun'
Oh, hear the word of the Lord.

Obviously the unknown composer of that old spiritual was thinking of the words of our text as he wrote this little tune – praising the power of the Word of the Lord.

But what may not be so obvious is what the Lord had in mind when he showed Ezekiel his vision of the valley of the bones. At this point in his ministry Ezekiel Jerusalem lay in ruins and its citizens had been carried off in chains. Yet the Lord still had great promises to fulfill. The Lord would still bring a Savior into the world through the nation of Judah and in the land he had promised them. With the vision of the valley of dry bones the Lord was showing Ezekiel and the exiled people of his nation that what appeared to be a hopeless situation was anything but hopeless.

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

Isn't this an amazing vision. I wonder what Ezekiel was thinking as the Lord led him back and forth in this vast open graveyard of dried bones. While we don't know what Ezekiel was thinking as he walked among the disjoined skeletons in this valley of bones, we do know what the Lord had in mind. The Lord explains what he had in mind later in our text: **“Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’** But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. Let's back up to the Lord's question: Can these bones live?

Theme: Can These Bones Live?

As we seek the Lord's answer to this question we'll have the opportunity to

1. Consider what sin does to us
2. Consider what the Holy Spirit does for us

Dry bones are an appropriate reminder of the effect of sin. The psalmist David describes the gnawing effects of unconfessed sins in this way. (Psalms 32:3) **When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long.** Ezekiel saw the ultimate result of that wasting away. He saw with his own eyes the truth proclaimed in our epistle lesson for today: **If you live according to the sinful nature, you will die.**

Every sin in our lives is like a seed of death, which our sinful nature loves to plant within our hearts and lives. The people of Judah and Jerusalem had become victims of spiritual apathy. They went through the motions of worship – bringing their sacrifices at the required times to the required temple. But they also compromised the Lord's will by living like the heathen nations around them. And these compromises finally killed their faith. But they of course still thought of themselves as the people of promise – they were unaware of their true spiritual condition in spite of the prophet Ezekiel's warnings about their sin.

And that's why during the ministry of Ezekiel the Lord allowed this people to be carried off into captivity by the Babylonians. Now their physical situation more closely resembled their spiritual condition. **They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’**

In exile they began to wonder if they really had forfeited their claim on God's promises. They lament that their hope has been destroyed. Had their sins made God's promises null and void? Had their rebellion canceled the promise of being the people from whom the Lord would bring forth the Savior of the World? Those were the questions and fears of the faithful.

The answers would be found in the valley of bones. But before we head back to that valley for another look – let's take a look at our own selves because those who are unwilling to learn the sad lesson of Israel's history are bound to repeat it!

By faith in Jesus we are the people of God. The pattern we saw in the lives of the people at the time of Ezekiel could easily repeat itself in our lives and if left unchecked could finally reduce us to nothing but a skeleton of the people of God. It's all too easy to go through the motions of worship with out the attitude of worship. It's all too easy for us to get caught up with the heathen ways of our materialistic society. It's all too easy for us to end up compromising our faith and the truths of Scripture. There's a lesson to be learned by looking at the spiritual graveyard of the once-believing nation of Israel.

But the Lord doesn't want us to dwell on this picture of death for long – with his question, “Can these bones live?” he invites us to see a picture of what the Holy Spirit does for us. In response to the Lord's question, Ezekiel replied. **“O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”** ⁴Then the Lord said to him **“Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’**

The same word of the Lord that called the world into being from nothing, that called Lazarus from the grave, and that has called us to faith would call spiritually dead Israel back to life. The breath that the Lord gives them comes from his Spirit – in fact the word breath and spirit are the same word in the original language of this text.

⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.”

Through this miracle of bring life to the dry bones – the Lord was picturing the miracle of bringing his rebellious people back to life. From what should have been the beginning of eternal death the Lord called them back to himself – showing them that he is the Lord – the God of free and faithful grace.

The spiritual resurrection which the Lord pictures here is repeated in every believer. Everyone is by nature dead in sin as Paul reminds us: (Ephesians 2:1) **As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.** But the Holy Spirit made us alive again as Paul also reminds us: (Ephesians 2:4-5) **But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, ⁵made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved.**

The Lord asked, “Can these bones live?” And the Lord promised that the bones would come to life and live. Now Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded – he spoke the word of the Lord and he tells us: **as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.**

The dry bones had become a corpse – a lifeless body with no breath in it – just as Adam was once a lifeless corpse formed from the dust of the earth until the Lord breathed the breath of life into him so these bones would not live until the breath of life entered them. **⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come breath from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.**

Ezekiel carried out the orders the Lord had given him and the Lord carried out his promises. This can be a description of our lives too. As we carry out the Lord's orders to bring up our children in the knowledge of the Lord – we're not just taking care of the kids any longer. We're shaping the souls of God's own children by letting them learn of Jesus from the way we talk and act. Knowledge that we're doing the Lord's will in our lives removes the boredom and drudgery from our lives. We aren't just working for a paycheck – we're serving God and supporting our families as God expects. We're not just studying. We're using our minds to maximum capacity because God expects us to use the intellect he has given us. And the Lord will keep the promises he made to bless those lives which give glory to him just as he kept the promises made to Ezekiel by calling the bones to life.

Immediately the Lord explains what has happened to Ezekiel – giving him a message of comfort and hope for the people. **¹¹Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy and say to them:**

‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’”

After Jerusalem had fallen and the rest of the nation had joined them in exile, the Jews in Babylon had given up hope. But this vision from the Lord told them that the Lord could change their hopeless situation. He could give them spiritual life. He could re-settle them in the land of promise. He could and he would send the world the Savior he had promised through these people. These were words of promise to a people in exile.

Notice how the Lord comforts them – twice calling them his people – assuring them he has not abandoned them and reminding them that he is with them always. He will deal with them in his grace: **¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.’”** Let there be no doubt the Lord says – I have spoken I have kept my word – you can count on my faithfulness says the Lord.

The apostle Paul describes all Christians in their former state as being “foreigners and aliens,” separated from Christ and exiled from God because of sin. But in his might and mercy the Lord has made us alive with Christ, forgiving our sin and enabling us to become fellow citizens with God’s people. We’re part of the vast army the Lord raised to spiritual life.

What has this vision shared with us? When we look carefully we realize we’re dry bones who need the life giving breath of the Spirit to breath new life into us each day through the forgiving grace of our Savior. The one who we see on the cross again this Lenten season allowed our sins to dry him up in the death of hell. That’s why the spirit can grant us forgiveness and that’s why the Father can call us his own people as he daily renews our lives through the Spirit! As we look at our own lives and see what the ravages of sin have done to us as we’ve rebelled against our Lord we must ask the question about selves – “can these bones live?” The wonderful answer of God’s amazing grace is a resounding yes. And so in this vision may we not only see a picture of what sin does to us but also a picture of the Holy Spirit does for us – calling us to life through the Gospel in word and sacrament and promising us life in the eternal Jerusalem of heaven. Amen.