

Sermon for May 23, 2021

Our Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14 (The Valley of Dry Bones)

The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord God, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord." So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.' Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord."

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Notice that Ezekiel is commanded to say only what the Lord God gives him to say.

The scene opens with the Lord taking a walk with his servant/son... His hand is on him. And they walk through a valley filled with thousands of bleached white bones.

This apparently goes on for a length of time, without words being spoken. In my mind, the silence is broken by the voice of a crow, every now and then. And in the background, the low noise of all kinds of insects buzz.

Their sandaled feet are unusually loud as they walk the sandstone pathways. Ezekiel, occasionally stumbling clumsily among the bones; they make a sound, oddly musical, in that they are so dry and brittle, they sound like pieces of broken pottery as they clink and

clunk together. The intrusion into the sacred solitude of these bones, as they lie in state, disturbs the holiness of this mass grave. The Son of Man flinches each time he disrupts the bones in this manner, his inelegant gate knocking the remains of men and women all kittywampus. It doesn't happen too often but when it does, he looks up to the Lord at his side, who is leading him gracefully among the bones, his expression is apologetic, but the face of the Lord is implacable, seemingly unconcerned as they walk through the vast open grave.

How long have they been walking in silence among these bones? Minutes or hours? A few hundred yards or a few hundred miles?

The sun is high and he feels the heat of it. He looks down at the round bones, the skulls where faces used to be. At first he marveled over their unique features. Their shapes, their voids, how the lines on them knit together. Then the vast quantities of long bones. The variety of pelvises and the masses of little bones. They all began to blend together and look the same.

His thoughts beheld moments of wonder, and moments of horror. Sadness and disgust. Curiosity and detachment. Being sometimes overwhelmed by the scale of death, and other times being perplexed and confused by death itself. So many thoughts ... and still they walked on.

Suddenly he was aware they had stopped. And they now stand on a low rise in the land and the bones are all around them in every direction. What was the point of walking him through this vast battlefield?

He guessed that he was about to find out.

And then the Lord spoke to Ezekiel, and asked him this question: "Son of man, can these bones live?" Maybe we could translate that as... Perhaps, the bones can live again? Or be re-animated....become alive. The idea is... still, is it even possible?

What was the point of asking HIM? It's not possible for Ezekiel, and he knows this. Why state the obvious? But the Lord is not actually asking if Ezekiel can do this, only if it's possible in theory, I suppose. And in reality, that's up to God. If God should will it, then sure; if not... then no.

Ezekiel answers: You know (or You alone know) the answer to that... That's up to you. That's entirely Your decision.

God at this point doesn't explain himself, he simply says this is what WE are going to do... OK, those exact words are not used in the text, but it describes the action... Ezekiel is going to speak the prophetic words that God gives him to say.

Over these bones, say this...

“O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.”

So Ezekiel did as he was told to do... and as he was speaking, behold, a great rattling of bones as they came together and made complete skeletons, and over these bones, came meat and gristle... flesh and sinews sounds more respectful, perhaps, but the description is as crude as calling these bodies “bags of bones” or “sacks of meat” because at this point that is all they are. They are unliving bodies. All the parts of a living body are present. But the life breath that would animate them is not present.

To date, there is no science on this earth that can answer the question how life can rise up from NON-LIFE. You can bring all the physical parts together in one place, assemble them all into one unit even. But it can NOT on its own become alive. Life has to be *given* to it.

The Lord said to Ezekiel... Behold, the House of Israel... my people... but life is still not in them... Prophecy to them... Speak MY Word INTO THEM.

This is fascinating to me... Speaking the word *over* them had only the effect of making bodies. But speaking the Word INTO THEM had the effect of making those bodies come ALIVE...

And now before the prophet stood a great army of God's nation. And Ezekiel looks over this sight, in awe of what God's word can do.

THEY SAID, our Lord begins, they said 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.' What do you think? IS that so? Can I not raise up from these very stones, children of Abraham?

THEY have been forecasting the doom of the Church for centuries. THEY... meaning the world... They say that the Lord's people are going the way of the Dodo, fossils and relics of the past. Do you think that is so?

You alone know O Lord my God...

Prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD.”

Ezekiel was given a glimpse into what God can do. And the world will try to dissuade you from being a follower of Jesus. THEY will offer you words of discouragement. And it won't just be the world who tells you this... Listen carefully to what the sovereign Lord says... It's actually ISRAEL who is lamenting, crying out... 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' We look around at our own churches and see the empty pews, and wonder, where IS everyone? And I wonder... have we been merely speaking the words of God OVER the people? So that it was just the BODIES that are in attendance? Or have we somehow neglected to speak the prophetic words INTO them, so that they lived and breathed the promises of God?

Our hope is gone? Nonsense. Listen to the words of the Apostle St. Paul. Let me share a few excerpts from his letter to the Romans in chapter 8:

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently. In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.