

March 13, 2005
Lent 5

"Can These Bones Live?"

EZEKIEL 37:1-14

The 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. ² He 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. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath {⁵ The Hebrew for this word can also mean wind or spirit (see verses ⁶⁻¹⁴).} enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I 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.'" ⁷ So 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. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet-- a vast army. ¹¹ Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O 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. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I 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.'

No preacher was ever sent to serve a more unlikely congregation than the prophet Ezekiel. The Lord called him to preach to a congregation of dry bones. Don't you see the bones lying in the valley, anklebones, thighbones, knee bones, finger bones, and toe bones? The valley is full of dry bones, dry lifeless bones. The Lord called Ezekiel to preach to these dry bones and the Lord asked him this important question, "Can these bones live?"

No way! That would be our natural human response to the question, "Can these bones live?" But nothing is impossible with God. The God who sent his Son to this world, born of virgin, fully God and fully human, is the same God who can put his Spirit in to spiritually dead people and bring them to life. There are wide rivers to cross and high mountains to climb in our daily walk with the Lord. Nothing is impossible with God. There are people who do not want the gospel preached to them and they are like these dry bones. History shows and God's word reveals to us that when we proclaim the Word of God to these dry bones they can live.

Can this congregation and this preacher be used by the Lord to bring life to people who

are just as dead as the dry bones Ezekiel saw in the valley? Is there hope for the future, hope for the future of this congregation, hope for the future of the national church body to which we belong, or hope for the Christian faith in a postmodern world? Let's look for an answer to this question, **"Can these bones live?"** not in the vagaries and in workings of our human logic, but in the revealed truth of God's Word.

1) Look at the preacher

First we see the preacher. This was no ordinary preacher. The hand of the Lord was upon him. "The hand of the Lord is upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of the valley, and it was full of dry bones." It was the hand of the Lord that picked up Ezekiel and put him into this valley, and it was the hand of the Lord that allowed him to be part of things that were humanly impossible.

My dear Christian friends, the hand of the Lord has plucked you like a burning stick from the fire. He led you to saving faith in Christ, and because you are his child his hand holds you tight in this life and for all eternity. Who knows what opportunities the hand of the Lord might open for you to serve the Lord and proclaim his truth in the week that is unfolding before you.

Ezekiel was brought out by Spirit. People who are in the Spirit are beautiful creatures. They walk and think and act differently from those who are not in Spirit. As our reading from Romans 8 told us, "Those who are led by the Spirit are the sons of God." They live each day and each hour with the Spirit testifying to them that they are God's dear children.

Ezekiel must have wondered to himself, "What is the Lord doing with me, placing me into this valley of dry bones and asking me to preach to these dry bones?" The Lord has given you a valley in which to live, your place at work, your desk in school, your home in your neighborhood. If you look around you on the basis of what God's Word reveals to you, you will see you are surrounded by people who are dry bones. They are spiritually dead, without God and without hope and they need your help. You are to be in the world, but not of the world. Philippians 2 says that you are to shine like stars in a crooked and depraved generation.

2) The congregation

We have seen the preacher. Now let's look more closely at the congregation. "And I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley and they were very dry." The Lord led him back and forth throughout this valley so that he would see this dry bones up close and personal. The Lord asks Ezekiel the tough question, "Can these bones live?" From what Ezekiel saw with his very own eyes, it would have been so easy to say, "No way!"

How do you look at people without Christ? Do you see them as dry bones? Do you seem them spiritual dead, without hope unless the Lord brings them to life again? What about the one billion Muslims in the world? How do you view them? Or what about the millions of people in this state of California who are waking up each day without saving faith in the blood of Christ that cleanses them?

A woman once told me that it was no use for me to visit her husband because he would never come to church anyway. She had lived with that dry bone for years and saw no way that he would ever believe in Christ or be baptized or sit in worship with her. Just recently this man's daughter told me that her dad was received into communicant membership in one of our churches in Tucson and he does not miss a Sunday.

Can these bones live? Can the wayward son or daughter in your family be brought back to the Lord? Can the neighbor across the street who didn't appreciate your invitation to come to worship on Easter Sunday ever be reached for the Lord? Nothing is impossible with God.

3) The power of the Word

Are you ready to see a miracle? The Lord told Ezekiel he should preach the Word of the Lord to these dry bones and there would be a miracle. "This what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I 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." Can these bones live? The Lord answers that question by telling Ezekiel to get ready to see a miracle as bones come to life, and flesh and skin are attached to them.

We don't always see what God wants us to see? We don't have enough hope in what God can do through us as individuals and as a congregation to bring people from death to life. We could have a spiritual dead person come to worship this coming Sunday or this Easter and the Lord could use us to bring that person to life. Impossible? No way? Not in my lifetime? That's not what God's word tells us. Are you ready to see a miracle?

"So I prophesied (or preached) as I was commanded." The greatest revivals in the history of the church have always centered on preaching or proclaiming the simple truth of God's Word whether in a sermon or personal witnessing. "Flee from the wrath to come." "Look to Jesus the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus has given us our marching orders before he ascended into heaven. "Preach the gospel to every creature." The command is simple but it will demand or best.

Do you hear something? (Pause). Listen more carefully? What is that sound I hear? Why it is the sound of bones beginning to rattle and shake. When the gospel finds its way into the church, there will always be noise. There will be rattling and shaking and movement as bones, dry bones, start coming alive. Do you want to be part of a congregation where there is no sound and no noise, or do you want to be part of a shaking and rattling and movement of dry bones as the Spirit of the Lord brings life through preaching and teaching? Do you prefer the status quo or do you want the Lord to do some shaking and movement in our midst? I know what I am praying for and I know what you are praying for as well. We long and yearn to hear the sound of dry bones rattling and coming to life.

And what is that we see over there, over here, all over the valley? Bones are coming together, thighbones and hipbones, anklebones and leg bones, finger bones and hand bones. And what do I see, tendons and flesh appearing on those bones that are moving? And do I see skin covering the flesh and bones? But one thing is missing. There is no life

in these dead bodies. They are still corpses laid out on rows on the valley floor.

Ezekiel is not done with preaching. The prophet hears the Lord call him to preach to the breath. The Hebrew word for breath and spirit are the same word, "RUACH." It is a word that sounds like what it means. Ezekiel is to preach, "This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may live." The dead bodies hear the Word of the Lord, and the word of the Lord unleashes the breath and life of the Holy Spirit as Jesus said, "My words are spirit and they are life." The dead come alive just as Lazarus came to life when Jesus shouted out "Lazarus come forth." The word of God has not lost its power. With Paul we say confidently "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes."

4) Look at the mighty army

What happens next? No scene from "The Lord of the Rings" about an army coming to life can equal the mighty army Ezekiel sees standing up on their feet. The bodies that came to life are all the true believers from every age that come to life through the power of the word. The Lord said he would bring them back to their land. He said, "Then you, my people will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring them up from them."

Some day we will shout with a loud voice and give the Lord the glory that is due to him when we see the vast multitude of people raised up to be a mighty army for the Lord. The Revelation says, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count..." Those who come to life cannot sit down, take a nap and wait for Jesus to come and take them home. They are part of an army with clear marching orders from their commander and chief. Said one soldier of the cross, "I'd rather wear out than rust out." Perhaps you cannot do 200 pushups and 200 sit-ups in a row without stopping and maybe you never could. But you still have the mighty power of prayer. The Lord will use you for his glory until the day he calls you home because he has told you this morning, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live." Can these bones live? I will ask this one more time and expect a loud "Yes, they can!" to come forth from this congregation. "Can these bones live? (Congregation responds with "Yes, they can!") Amen.