

Pastor Joe Polzin
Ezekiel 37:1-14
“Can These Bones Live?”
Year B – The Day of Pentecost
May 20, 2018

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Ezekiel had witnessed a lot in his life. He had been born at the height of Judean pride and idolatry, a hubris that led to the judgment of God. He witnessed firsthand the result of the physical and spiritual self-destruction of God’s people. Ezekiel had been called as a prophet so that he might warn the Judeans of this impending destruction, that they might repent. But they continued to feel secure in the presence of God and the fact they had the temple in Jerusalem, so they abused God’s presence and used it to justify their sinfulness.

Ezekiel was the one, therefore, who witnessed God withdrawing His presence from the temple, which meant the time had come for His people to suffer the fate they had invited upon themselves. And Ezekiel was there to witness the Babylonian army lay siege to Jerusalem, and destroy it, taking him and the formerly prideful Judeans to live in captivity.

It was in exile that Ezekiel’s ministry continued. He would bring the Word of God to those who lived in hostile territory. And that’s where our Old Testament reading comes in today, it’s at a time in Ezekiel’s life, and the life of God’s people, when all is quite desperately lost and hopeless.

The hand of the Lord brought Ezekiel to a valley where he saw the aftermath of an intense battle that had taken place. The valley was littered with the remains of those who had perished and were never buried. Perhaps, although we don’t know for sure, this was the place of the final battle of Judeans against the Babylonians. Perhaps the bones were all that were left of everything and everyone Ezekiel knew and loved about his former life, his former home.

He notes that the bones were *very dry* (37:2). And God asks, “Son of man, can these bones live?” (37:3) Which is an absurd question, because the answer is obviously not. How can what is so very dead come back to life?

Still, Ezekiel had the good sense not to answer. He allows God to provide the answer. “O Lord God, you know.” God continues, and He says He wants Ezekiel to prophesy to the dead bones, saying, “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” (37:4-6).

It’s an absurd question, followed by an absurd request. How can a prophet prophesy into ears that are not there? How can something that had been so dead now receive God’s Word? And yet, Ezekiel obeys, and he speaks. And then, there was a rattling, but not just a rattling, something like an earthquake. Thousands upon thousands of lifeless skeletons being shook and stitched together by the power of God. Can you *imagine* what that would have looked like to witness?

Rank upon rank of an exceedingly great army stood before Ezekiel’s eyes, and yet, something was still missing. Life was not complete because the breath of God, the Spirit of God, was not in them. Ezekiel prophesied one more time, and God breathed His life-giving breath into their corpses, and they were made alive once again.

God explains the meaning of all this to Ezekiel. Ezekiel lived among the exiles, who were worse than dead. In exile, they were *very* dead. They were saying among themselves, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off” (37:11). No one would even dare to ask such an absurd question as, “Can these bones live again?” They were so obviously dead, they would never return home, never again see life.

Yet, God was instructing Ezekiel to provide a different answer. An answer that only God could provide. He instructed Ezekiel to speak the Word of the Lord into ears that previously were not there. In their past sin, the Judeans were deaf to what the Lord had to say. Now, something that had been so dead was receiving God’s Word.

And here’s what he said: “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...” (37:12-14).

God would return His people from their grave of exile, and would bring them back to life in the land of Israel. This would be their resurrection, and the Spirit would breathe new life into them. They were not arrogant and prideful like they once were. But rather, they were a humble remnant, awaiting the fulfillment of an ancient promise. A promise of salvation. A promise of a Savior, the Christ.

About 500 years later, God’s Son, the Son of Man, would enter our world, our valley of dry bones. Here he encountered the aftermath of an intense battle, not a battle of swords and shields, but a battle of sin and spirit. And he looked out and saw earth littered with the remains of those who had perished. Our remains.

Since the moment of the Fall, and every moment until today, the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve have lived out the curse of our sin, the reality spoken by God thousands of years ago, “From dust you have been made, and to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19). Our bones were *very dry*, and we didn’t even have ability to ask, let alone answer, an absurd question such as “Can these bones live?” How could they, when all we see around us are the results of our sin: pain, and disease, and death? Our hope was lost, and we were indeed cut off from our God in the exile of our sin.

Yet Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God, provided a different answer. And answer only he could provide. Obeying his Father’s will, he came to be and to speak the Word of God, bringing that Word to us who were very dead. And though he spoke to those who had no ears to hear, and no life to be found, he breathed on us his Spirit, that we may live again.

But *he* was killed. Those who were so deaf to what he said couldn’t bear risking listening to him anymore. And they put him on the cross as an example to all those who would dare point to life from death. But that’s exactly what Jesus did, even *in* his death, because he provided his life in exchange for ours.

And then... he overcame death. And what’s more, he said that he would come back again to do the same for you! Jesus says to you, “I will open *your* grave on the day of the resurrection, and I will raise *you* from your grave! Your sinews and flesh and skin and bones will be put together imperishable, and Jesus will breath his life-giving Spirit into you, and you will live and know that he is the Lord.

What once was very dead will now be very much alive. You will see the words of Job come to pass; Job said, “For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God” (Job 19:25-26).

You have been given certain hope of your resurrection on the Last Day because you have already been raised to life in your Baptism. There Jesus provided an answer only he could provide to the question, “Can my bones live?” And the answer for you is, “Yes.” Your old, dead, sinful self was drowned, and you came out of those waters alive. And so, when Jesus returns, your body *and* soul will forever be alive, forever have the life-giving breath of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

You see, that is what we celebrate today, this Day of Pentecost. Because the same Spirit who breathed life into Adam and Eve at Creation, the same Spirit who breathed life into that great army of dry bones for Ezekiel, the same Spirit who breathed life into Jesus as he was raised from the dead, the same Spirit who breathed life into the Church at Pentecost, He is the same Spirit who, through your Baptism, brings you new life right now. And He is the same Spirit who will breathe resurrected life into your bones when Jesus returns again.

In fact, I think it’s fair to say that the Holy Spirit is in the business of providing an absurd answer to an absurd question, “Can these very dry, very dead bones live?” Amazingly, when the answer seems like it must be, “No,” over and over again it’s always, “Yes!”

But today, this truth seems to run completely against the world in which we live, because we live in a world that is still permeated with death. But instead of seeing death as one of our great enemies that Christ must overcome for us, it’s now becoming popular and even celebrated to choose the moment of one’s death. This movement is called “death with dignity,” as if it were more noble to take the decision of death out of God’s hands, instead of trusting in the Lord to bring the hour that He has ordained in His infinite wisdom.

We also have the blood of millions of lives on our collective hands. In the 45 years since *Roe v. Wade*, which allowed virtually all abortions to be made legal, 60 million children in our country have not been allowed to open their eyes in this world. 60 million children who otherwise would have led productive lives under the care and love of their Creator God.

And this culture of violence and death permeates all circles of society, probably most heart-wrenching in our schools. The places that are supposed to be locations of safety and learning for our children have been turned now into the places of their death. 22 school shootings in our country so far in the 20 weeks of 2018, the most recent this past week in Santa Fe, Texas.

These disturbed and unhealthy children who commit horrendous crimes against their peers, and all these things, are but symptoms of our culture that is plagued with sin, and therefore permeated with death. Symptoms of a country that has all but given up on this thing called faith. Symptoms of a generation that does not know the life-giving or life-affirming God who has both created and redeemed us. Symptoms of a church that only wrings its hands, shakes its head, and assumes it’s only a matter of time until the last person leaves this sanctuary, turns off the light, and locks the door one final time.

We are metaphorically, and in some cases, quite literally in a valley of death, a valley of dry bones, as we see the aftermath of an intense battle of sin versus Spirit in our world, in our country, and in our church. And we may not even dare to ask such an absurd question as, “Can these bones live?” Because we’re afraid of what the answer might be.

Yet, we should not answer. We, like Ezekiel, should have the sense not to answer for God. Because it’s a question that God has answered emphatically time and time again. “I will breathe my Spirit within you, and you shall live. And you will know that I am the Lord.”

This Pentecost, we are reminded that the Holy Spirit is still in the business of providing life where there is only death. He provides return where there is only exile. He provides a resurrection where there is only the grave. He provides salvation where there is only damnation.

He provides forgiveness where there only sin. He provides hope where there is only despair. He provides and points us to Jesus, who is the only answer in a world that is permeated with death.

May we, who have been raised to new life by Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, be ambassadors to a world that so desperately needs the life-giving breath of God that the Spirit provides. Just as the Holy Spirit enabled the apostles on Pentecost to share that life-giving message in all languages to all nations, may *we* always do the same. We realize it's not our word or answers that have any power, it's God's Word and the answer He provides.

“Can these bones live?” The Lord God knows, and has done it. In Jesus' name. Amen.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.