

The Fifth Sunday In Lent (March 29, 2020)

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Theme: Dry Bones Can Live.

- I. God displays the bones.
- II. God says, "Prophesy to the bones."
- III. God makes the bones live.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Heavenly Father, sanctify us by your truth; your word is truth.

Dear friends whom the LORD has made alive through his word,

In high school and college biology classes the students often dissect animals, mice, fetal pigs, cats. They take off the skin, remove the organs one by one. They disassemble the bones, piece by piece. That's quite a job, taking an animal apart. Imagine when you were finished, your instructor told you, "Put that animal back together again." How impossible! What if your instructor told you, "Put it together so well that it comes alive." How even more impossible! In our verses we hear about dead bodies, human bodies, bones, dry bones. Dead dry bones don't just come together and become alive. But the Lord showed Ezekiel, and today he shows us: Dry Bones Can Live. So let us watch as God displays the bones. As God says, "Prophesy to the bones." As God makes the bones alive.

Ezekiel was the Lord's prophet, who proclaimed God's word to Israel nearly 600 years before Jesus was born. He prophesied not in his homeland of Israel, but far away in Babylon. That's where the Israelites were too, in Babylon. They had been carried off in captivity. Because the Israelites had largely forgotten the Lord and forsaken him, he allowed the Babylonians to conquer them. The soldiers destroyed the city of Jerusalem, and their temple, and carried the people off to exile in Babylon.

Perhaps you've experienced some tragedy, where the situation was so hopeless that all you could do was to sit down and cry. That's how the Israelites felt. In Psalm 137 we hear them say, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps." It was not a time for singing, but a time for weeping. It looked like they were gone from their homeland forever, that special land that God had promised to his people and given them. They had seen their nation defeated and destroyed. It looked like there was no hope for Israel. What about God's promises to send the Savior through Israel? Was all hope gone there too? It seemed like God had totally rejected them, and the people were in despair.

In order to reassure his people, God granted Ezekiel a remarkable vision. In this vision, the Lord took Ezekiel and set him in the middle of a valley. In that valley, Ezekiel saw, not lush green grass, beautiful flowers and a stream flowing gently by, as we might expect of a valley. No, it was an ugly sight. He saw bones, human bones. The valley was full of bones, as if it were an old battle field. The Lord led him back and forth among them, and Ezekiel saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. Those bones had been there a while. The flesh had long ago decayed; the bones had fallen apart from one another, and the sun and wind had bleached them dry. Those bones were as dead as bones can get.

Then God asked Ezekiel a question: "Son of man, can these bones live?" The obvious answer would be, "No, dead dry bones cannot live. They're dead and they're going to stay dead." Instead, Ezekiel answered, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Only the one who by his mighty power had made man from the dust of the ground in the first place, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; only the Sovereign LORD would be able to make these dead bones alive again. God has power to raise the dead, as Scripture describes so often, and he will raise the dead on the last day. On Easter we will hear about the physical resurrection from the dead. But these verses tell us of a different miracle of God that is just as great, a spiritual resurrection from the dead, raising dead souls to life, souls that are lost in sin and have no hope in God. By themselves they are without any hope. They're dead forever, dry bones, until God gets a hold of them.

Those dry bones were a picture of the Israelites, exiled in Babylon, a dead nation, a people with as little hope as those bones. The Lord said to Ezekiel, "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 (from the Lord.)'"

Do we ever think, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone"? The statistics tell us that Christianity is losing ground in America, that maybe Christianity is a thing of the past. And suddenly we see the valley of dry bones. Someone tells us that our congregation will not last long, or we ourselves see some problems and areas in which our congregation resembles that valley of dry bones. There is no lack of spiritual hopeless situations, like God's nation of Israel, destroyed and in exile in Babylon. But before we give up hope and despair, let us see what God can do with dry bones.

God said to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is 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.'" God promised to make the bones alive, and how would he do it? Through his almighty word. He told Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones; speak my word to them; say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'" So Ezekiel prophesied, and as he was prophesying, he heard a rattling sound as the bones came together and formed skeletons. Then he looked and saw tendons and flesh appear on them, and skin covered them. But still there was no breath in them. That valley must have looked like a battle field littered with corpses. Then the Lord said, "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.'" So Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet--a vast army.

That is what the Lord would do for his dead nation of Israel. He would spiritually raise them from the dead. Through his word God would raise them to spiritual life. The Holy Spirit would work in their despairing dead hearts a living faith and trust in God and his promises that would make them a vast army for the Lord, through which he would send the Savior and win the salvation of mankind. God commanded Ezekiel, "Therefore prophesy and say to the people of Israel: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them (graves referring to their unbelief and their hopeless lot in Babylon); I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 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.'" The Babylonian captivity lasted about 70 years. God

guided the events of history so that then the Israelites were free to return home. Because of the word of God, preached by Ezekiel and others, the armies of believing Israelites began returning to the promised land under leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah, and they rebuilt Jerusalem and the temple. God brought the dry bones of Israel back to life!

God still brings dead bones back to life. The Holy Spirit works that miracle of living faith and sure hope in Christ in people's hearts. At one time each and every one of us was nothing but dry bones, dead to God by nature. But through his word God has raised to life a vast army of believers here on earth. It is God's word that has made and continues to make our congregation a living congregation, an army of believers here that God has raised up from spiritual death, and will continue to bless through his word.

The Lord also says to us, "Prophecy to dry bones. Speak my word to those who are spiritually dead." He says, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Perhaps we might feel a bit awkward about doing that. Maybe we might think that it's a thankless and useless job. I'm sure that when God told Ezekiel to prophesy to those dry bones, he must have felt awkward about it. Maybe he even looked both ways first to make sure that no one was watching him prophesy to those bones. Talk about a thankless and useless job! But Ezekiel did it. And what did God do? He brought those dry bones to life!

We also need to keep in mind who does what. God does not tell us to work faith in people's hearts. Only the Holy Spirit can work that miracle. God tells us simply to proclaim his word. We get ourselves in all kinds of trouble if we start to think that we're responsible for bringing people to faith. Then we're either going to become very discouraged if it doesn't happen, or if it does, we're going to think that we're more than we really are. We're simply God's spokesmen, to proclaim his word. God didn't tell Ezekiel to raise those dead bones to life. He simply told him to prophesy to the bones. We do well to leave it to God to raise people to spiritual life, and concern ourselves with doing what he has commanded us to do--proclaim his word. Where God's word is preached and taught, there is hope, and there is life!

Aren't we ourselves living proof that God makes dry bones alive? In our natural sinful condition at birth we were dead to God, as we are told in Ephesians 2: "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins...--But-- because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions." And that same chapter goes on to tell us that we were originally exiled from God like the Israelites were exiled in Babylon: "Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. --But-- now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. ...Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets (the foundation of God's word), with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." Dry bones can live, and dry bones do live, in Christ Jesus, our crucified and risen Savior!

Amen.

Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever.
Amen.