

Pentecost

Bones and Breath

Sometime in the sixth century before Christ, when Ezekiel was caught up by the Spirit of the Lord into a vision of valley filled with dry bones, the people of Israel were living as exiles in Babylon. According to one scholarly estimate, it had been ten years since they had witnessed the destruction of their homes in Jerusalem—including the Temple of the Lord, which their theology had taught them was the place where God had made his dwelling among humanity. For ten years they had lived as captives in a strange city in a desert environment much different than their beloved Judean hill country, surrounded everywhere by the symbols of a great, pagan empire.

Those dry bones were a symbol of the people of Israel, who have become a people without hope—in danger of settling for this exile as a permanent state of affairs. “They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off.’” And already some had begun to assimilate to that new environment, blending into their new surrounding, living as if they would never return home.

Now fast forward twenty-six centuries or so. There’s no escaping the fact that we come here this morning knowing that but for the grace of God we could be joining the community of Santa Fe, Texas in mourning the deaths of teenagers struck down by a classmate with a deadly weapon. A report by CNN this week lists 22 times in the first 20 weeks of this year when there has been a shooting on

school grounds in the United States that has resulted in injury or death. This has become so prevalent that there are signs that some have begun to resign themselves to this as a permanent state of affairs. A student from Santa Fe said in an interview, "It's been happening everywhere, I've always kind of felt that eventually it would happen here, too."

This is only one thing that many seem to have resigned themselves, too. There's a constant stream of messages bombarding us—that may be playing inside our heads, too—telling us that big societal divides can't be bridged, that people can't really change. And accompanying this we see everywhere—perhaps even in ourselves—a hardening of defenses, and positions, and hearts. "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is gone ..."

The Lord gives Ezekiel a tour of these dry bones, and then he asks, "Son of man, can these bones live?" Ezekiel seems to be worried that this is a trick question—that either a 'yes' or a 'no' answer could get him in over his head. And so he gives a classic non-answer answer, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." How would you answer if the Lord asked you?

I'd like to make two observations about what the Lord tells Ezekiel. The first is that the Lord involves Ezekiel in his answer. It's possible to imagine a scenario in which the Lord just says, "See what I can do!" and then lets Ezekiel watch while does it. But instead he makes Ezekiel the one who speaks to the bones and the breath. He puts him in a place where he has to exercise an obedient faith; he

must be—as James puts it in the New Testament—not just a hearer of God's word, but a doer who acts on it.

It should be clear that it isn't Ezekiel's words—or even his faith—that makes anything happen to those dry bones. That's all about the power of God. He does it this way for Ezekiel's benefit. There's a difference between silently telling ourselves that we believe that the Lord can do something, and saying it out loud and acting it. It's what makes faith tangible in our lives.

The Lord also acts through Ezekiel's words because that's the way he most often acts in the world. Dramatic, supernatural events like Ezekiel's vision or the day of Pentecost are the exceptions—signs given by God in particular circumstances. Most of the time his transforming work is carried out by human hands.

The second observation is that Lord brings life back to the dry bones in two steps or stages—first he rebuilds the bones into bodies, and then he sends his Spirit to breathe life back into them. By doing it this way he makes a distinction between the two, which may help us to see how God works—and how God can work in those times in our lives when we feel that hope is dried up.

Let me try to put it this way. On the one hand, in the world around us, many people live as if the bones are that there really is. They believe, or at least live, as if life itself is nothing more than chemical reactions and electrical impulses—and there is nothing else—nothing beyond what we can do through our own human ingenuity and moral wisdom. On the other hand, many in the church act as if the

spirit is all that really matters—that organizations, structures, institutions, and the like—are at best irrelevant and at worst impediments to God's work in the world.

But in Ezekiel's vision the Lord shows that both matter. He restores those dry bones in a very dramatic fashion. But just as dramatically he sends breath into them. And together, body and breath they arise!

Ezekiel 37 is the Lord's message to that nation in exile—his promise in a time when they were tempted to settle for an very unsatisfactory status quo. It was his promise that there was more to the story, that the people Israel would be restored to their homeland.

It took several decades for that to happen. And compared to the drama of Ezekiel's vision, that way it happened looked pretty mundane. But the Lord restored the nation to life.

He did it by putting new flesh on the dry bones. The exiles found a new way to worship the Lord that didn't depend on offering sacrifices at the temple. They invented a new institution, the synagogue, and they created new forms of worship that were centered on a community gathered around the Scriptures. In fact, scholars are largely agreed that the time in exile was a golden age for putting God's word into writing.

And the same time the Lord breathed his Spirit of life into those restored bones. The people learned the spiritual lessons of their exile; they repented of the idolatry and injustice that led to that low point in their history. He set them free from the past and prepared them for a new future.

The return itself was made possible through ordinary events of geopolitics—the Persians eventually conquered the Babylonians, and the Persian king Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return to Palestine. But it was the breath of God, the wind of the Spirit, moving through all these things that accomplished God's purposes for his people.

In the days following Jesus' death and resurrection, the authorities in Jerusalem seemed not to have paid much attention to the followers Jesus who left behind. Scripture testifies that they were probably following the common wisdom still followed by the rulers of the world today. Once they had cut off the head of the movement begun by Jesus, they trusted that what remained would simply dry up and die of its own accord.

But we may remember that in those in-between days, the disciples actually did a little bit of tending to the “bones” of their movement. The book of Acts tells that in those days they chose a successor to Judas Iscariot. And in the process they did mundane things like establishing qualifications for the position of apostle, and deciding on a process for selecting someone for the job. But while restoring the organization was important, it wasn't enough. It took a mighty wind, the breath of God, the power of the Holy Spirit to form that small band of survivors into a movement that has changed the course of human history.

In the face of all the “dry bones” situations we find ourselves in – where we are tempted to say “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost,” we need to pay attention both to the bones and the breath. God does not ignore, and we

cannot ignore the human structures of our lives—first of all families and churches, but also schools and civic institutions and governments. Because they are the arena in which God chooses to do his work. We can have a hard time caring about some of these things, especially when there seems like so little room for movement or change. But when we stop caring about these things, we are in danger of hardening of our defenses and positions and hearts—becoming like so many dry bones. But in order to avoid this we must believe that God can work through these ordinary human means as he has done throughout history.

And we must also recognize that without the breath of God's Spirit in the world—these will be nothing more than human institutions limited by human sinfulness and human wisdom. And so we must join Ezekiel in putting our faith on the line, and calling for the breath of God to come from the four winds and breathe the Spirit of God into each of us, and into the church, and through us into all those other arenas of God's work in the world. Together with the church in the book of Acts we need to be still and watch and pray and seek the moving of the Lord, always open to God working in unexpected ways.

Can the dry bones on our valley live? The Lord knows! Will we act on the Lord's call, and let him use us in the next great outpouring of God's Spirit in the world? Amen.

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