

New Life for Old Bones

In the name of him who has poured out upon us his Holy Spirit, dear friends in Christ: This morning's Old Testament lesson is one that's fairly familiar to most of us, which is kind of strange, because there isn't much in the book of Ezekiel that the average Christian can recall off the top of the head. But there are two main reasons for this particular passage's relative popularity. The first is that it's hard to forget. The mental image of all those old dry bones coming together with a loud rattling sound and assembling themselves into skeletons, and so on, well, it's the kind of thing that sticks with you once you've heard it. The second reason the passage is so familiar is because of that old African-American spiritual song based upon it that many of us learned as children. That's the one about "Dem bones, dem bones, demdry bones." And I daresay that if there are children here who don't know what I'm talking about, then certain parents and grandparents have been remiss in their duties of teaching the essentials of nursery rhyme and song to their offspring.

But however familiar this passage may be, I wonder if most of us understand what it's really all about. I mean, who was Ezekiel? Why did God give him this strange vision? And most importantly, what was the message the Lord meant to communicate to his people by it then and today?

Starting with the last question first, the vision of the valley of dry bones is one that demonstrates our God's wondrous power and intent to bring resolution and restoration to what are, humanly speaking, hopeless situations. He puts the prophet down in the desert amid all these dry, parched, and jumbled up bones and has him stroll around among them to impress upon him both their vast number and the fact that they are just as lifeless and desiccated as they can be. When he asks, "Son of man, you suppose there's any chance these bones can live?" the obvious human response is, "No way. These folks are as dead as dead can be—not to mention that it would be like solving the world's most complex jigsaw puzzle just to sort them all and figure out which bones belong to which skeleton. It would take a miracle – and an inconceivably big one at that – for these bones to live." Of course, Ezekiel realizes he's dealing with one who can apply more than merely human effort to the situation; but even then, it's a long stretch for the prophet to imagine how even God could fix a problem this big. When he answers, "Lord, you alone know", the sense of it is, "It *may* be possible *for you*; but if so, it lies beyond my ability to imagine how."

In stark contrast then, to both the magnitude and complexity of the problem, the Lord's solution is remarkably simple. He directs the prophet to just *talk* to the bones. "Tell them, 'Listen up, you dry bones, this is what the Lord says'." And I have to believe that Ezekiel must have felt pretty stupid addressing himself to a bunch of dried up old bones lying there in the desert. Put yourself in his sandals for a moment. You're thinking, "Talk to them? Talk to *whom*? There's nobody here but me. It's not like these bones can hear what I'm saying." But then again, if you're the Lord's prophet and he gives you a message to deliver, you'd best not argue with the boss. You do what you're told. So Ezekiel starts talking to the bones. And even as he's speaking the miracle of regeneration begins to take place. The bones come flying together, each one seeking its proper place. Flesh and skin begin to cover them and soon whole bodies are formed. Then, when the prophet speaks again as directed, the breath of life enters them, and an immense crowd of newly resurrected people stand up on their feet.

It's a marvelous thing indeed; and two things should just leap out at us here: first, how surprisingly easy it is for the Lord to completely reverse what seems to be an utterly hopeless situation. What are insurmountable obstacles and impossible problems to us are child's play to him. The second thing we should see is that the way the Lord solves such problems and affects such astonishing changes is through his Word. That's it: simply by speaking he gets the job done – and the Lord doesn't even have to do the speaking himself. His Word is powerful even when coming from the mouth of a mere mortal man.

Now, bearing these important truths in mind, let's put the prophet's vision into its historical context. Ezekiel, whose name means "The Lord is my strength" was the man called by God to serve as his prophet and

pastor to the Jewish people exiled in Babylon. And let me explain that: It's about 600 BC and the Empire of Babylon had pretty much conquered all the nations of the ancient near east. Everything from Egypt to India was under their control. And that meant that all the conquered nations in between were under their military thumb and had to pay them heavy tribute in the form of taxes. You might think of it this way: the biggest bully on the playground had beat everyone else up and now was taking their lunch money in exchange for not beating them up again. Anyway, God's people in the nation of Judah were among the subjugated – and rightly so, for the Lord had brought the scourge of Babylon upon them as a punishment for their habitual rebellion against him. But just as the Jews had a history of rebelling against the Lord, they also kept taking it upon themselves to stand up against the big bully that he had sent to discipline them. And when that happened, the bully had to beat them up again to put them back into their place.

Now in real terms that meant calling out the Babylonian army, marching them over to Israel, and doing the dirty work of slaughtering civilians, destroying villages, burning crops, laying sieges to cities, and so on. It was a pain in the neck for the Babylonians, and they really didn't like having to do it; and beside that, it was bad business. Calling out the army and sending them on a campaign was expensive, and all the destruction they had to do to get the job done meant that much less that would show up as revenue. But they had to do it, because if little nations like Judah stood up to them and got away with it, well then, all the other nations they'd conquered would too. Soon the whole Empire would come apart. So, to prevent this from happening, it made more sense to make an example of nations that stepped out of line. The Babylonians would beat them up harder than the first time to make it less likely that they'd step out of line again, and also so that the other subjugated nations would see and learn not to rebel.

Okay, well it happened in 597 BC that the king of Judah decided to have yet another go at standing up to the bully of Babylon. It was a bad move. The Babylonians came back in force and they were mad about having to go through the extra trouble. They made the Jews very sorry for their mistake, what with all the killing, pillage, rapine, and what have you. And as an additional measure of punishment, some fifteen thousand people were taken from their homes in Jerusalem and marched 800 miles away to Babylon where they were forced to live in makeshift refugee settlements. Those chosen for exile were for the most part the skilled craftsmen, the best educated, and the successful business people. The thought was to remove those most likely to be looked up to as community leaders so that those who were left behind would be easier to control and less likely to organize yet another rebellion. That way too the more skilled people could be put to work for the Babylonians.

Now, life for these fifteen thousand exiles was hard and bitter; but they lived in the hope that one day they might be allowed to return home. It was the one thing that kept them going: the thought that soon, perhaps, they would be able to go back to the Promised Land, to Jerusalem, and specifically to the Temple of God where his holy presence was. You see, from their perspective, they weren't just 800 miles from home; they were that far away from God. They felt cut off – as if the Lord had abandoned them. And it got worse still. After they'd been in Babylon for about ten years, the folks back home in Judah foolishly rebelled yet again against their Babylonian masters. And this time the Babylonians were through fooling around. They leveled the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of God to the ground. Two thirds of the population died. The remaining third were sold as slaves and, as far as history is concerned, are lost forever. And just to be sure they wouldn't have to deal with rebellious Jews in Judah any more, the Babylonians brought settlers from other parts of their empire to inhabit the land of Israel.

So now, from the exiles point of view, the situation had become truly hopeless. The one hope they'd clung to was gone. It appeared that they could never go home: they had no home to go to. They were a people without a country. And worse than that, having lost the Promised Land and the Temple, they thought of themselves as a people without God. They were, for all intents and purposes, a dead nation, destined to be absorbed, scattered, and lost among the stronger peoples of the world.

The Lord gave the prophet Ezekiel the vision of the valley of dry bones to tell his people in exile, "No. You're wrong. It's not over yet. Though the situation looks hopeless, I will restore you to your land, I will allow you to rebuild Jerusalem and my Temple, and I will keep all the promises I made to the Patriarchs and to the house of Israel." That seemed to them to be an impossible dream – as unlikely as dead, dry bones coming to life again. And though no one could imagine how the Lord might accomplish it, some of the exiles heard the

promise of God and, by the power of the Spirit working in them, believed it. And they continued to believe it, passing their unlikely hope down to their children and even to their grandchildren, for it would be another fifty years before the promise was fulfilled. And I won't go into the details; but when it did happen, the overall situation literally changed overnight. The mighty empire of Babylon fell in a day, and shortly thereafter the Lord raised up a new Persian emperor who was friendly to the Jews in exile. He did something never heard of before in the ancient world. With a single spoken command, he gave the exiled Jews back their freedom and their land. And when he did, an entire nation was resurrected from its dried-up old bones.

And that, as they say, is history. The Lord fulfilled his Word. But we would miss what is certainly a more important point if we failed to see that the vision of Ezekiel awaits a yet greater fulfillment. The Lord who resurrected the nation of his people from exile has also promised to resurrect the bodies of his people from death and the grave. The fulfillment of the first points ahead prophetically to what is yet to come. This is what gives us hope as we stand by the caskets of our loved ones and lower them into the earth. This is what gives us hope as we face our own mortality. Though the situation looks utterly hopeless at such times, though we may feel that we have been abandoned by God, through the prophet Ezekiel the Lord says to us, "No. It's not over. I will raise you up from corruption and decay; from your remains I will make for you a body immortal, I will breathe my Spirit into you, and I will bring you to the eternal Promised Land." Our Lord Jesus echoed the same promise when he said, "A time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear [my] voice and come out." On that day our dried-up bones and dust will hear his spoken Word and obey. And we who lived in hope and trust in Jesus as our Savior from sin will enter into the kingdom of his Father, while those who did not will go into eternal exile.

So, in the vision of the valley of dry bones we have a prophecy that speaks God's power and loving purpose to what seem to be two hopeless situations. It's a prophecy that has already been fulfilled in the past and yet that fills us with joy and hope as we look forward to its greater fulfillment in the future. Seeing that and being satisfied, the mistake would be to leave it there and miss its significance for us in the present. The message of Pentecost, the day we celebrate today, is that God speaks his Word and pours out his Spirit of life on tired, dry, old bones right *now*.

What do I mean? I mean that today – this very moment – by the spoken Word of God, our Lord sends his Spirit to raise those who are dead in sin and he works in them the miracle of faith and new life in Christ. Every one of us who trusts in the Lord Jesus was once as helpless and hopeless as the dried-up bones of Ezekiel's vision. There was nothing we could do for ourselves. The situation was beyond all human power to change. But to these bodies dead in sin someone somewhere spoke God's life-giving Word. For most of us it happened at our Baptisms, for others it came later in life; but when it happened, the Holy Spirit of God entered us. He convinced us that we were lost and condemned sinners, and then he pointed us to the Savior, God's Son, who was condemned in our place. He showed us that on the cross the Lord Jesus atoned for our sins. And he demonstrated to us that by rising to life on the third day we who trust in him also rise to new life—yes, in the future; but also right now. And this present miracle is every bit as great as the Old Testament resurrection of the Jewish nation or the future resurrection of our bodies.

And the Pentecost truth is that miracle continues to happen as we speak God's Word as directed. It happens every Sunday when we gather here. It happens when we reflect upon our sins and confess them. We can't do that on our own. We always want to justify ourselves or come up with excuses. If we come to repentance, that's the work of the Spirit in us showing us what's dead and rotten inside. It happens again when we hear the words of absolution and believe them. Then the Spirit enters these dry bones and points us to Christ in whom we have forgiveness and salvation. That's how he breathes in us new life; and in this new life we are enabled to rise, walk with Christ, and do things that are otherwise beyond our powers.

And knowing this should give us hope in what we think of as our hopeless situations in life. For example, we all know certain individuals who have up to this point resisted the life-giving work of God's Holy Spirit. We've shared God's Word with them repeatedly and it seems that nothing has happened. We're tempted to give up. That's a mistake as long as that person breathes the air of this life and the miracle of Pentecost continues to go on. We've already seen that by God's Word and Spirit the whole situation can change in an instant.

And the same is true of some of the other so-called hopeless situations in our lives. We who believe firmly that there will be a resurrection on the Last Day have a tendency to doubt that the Spirit can work new life in us right now. There are sins and temptations with which we constantly struggle and that we cannot seem to master, there are conflicts and old grudges with family members and others, there are couples whose marriages are coming apart, there are any number of other such problems; and the temptation to think of them in hopeless terms. We tell ourselves, "I'm too old, too set in my ways, too conditioned by the past, too angry, too hurt, too disappointed" ... the list goes on, but the bottom line is that "here's a sin problem too big for even the Lord to handle. There's no way these dried up old bones can live."

It's a lie. The Pentecost truth is that our gracious God is even now breathing his Holy Spirit into these old, dry bones and raising us to new and holier life in Christ Jesus our Lord. As always, he's doing it by his spoken Word. And by this Word he is working miracles. Let's never lose hope. Instead, let's continue to hear his Word, now and always, that the work he has started in us may be brought to completion in the fullness of his glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!