

Sermon for May 24, 2015 - Pentecost

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (NIV84)

Theme: Dry bones; hear the word of the LORD!

- 1) Though your bones are dry and your hope has perished. (vv. 1–3, 11)
- 2) I will put my Spirit in you and you will live. (vv. 4–14)

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, "Prophecy 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 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, "Prophecy 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.' (Eze 37:1-14 NIV84)

There are fewer things more sad than what Ezekiel saw when he first looked over the valley to which the Spirit of the LORD led him. He saw a mighty, proud army reduced to nothing but brittle bones. No life. No victory. No hope.

What made this scene even sadder is that this fallen host was God's glorious army on earth: his chosen nation of Israel!

Why did they lay there fallen? Because they had become overly proud and self-confident. Imagining they didn't need the spiritual armor God provided in His Word, they were led astray by the world's enticements. They believed the devil's lies over God's promises and, in so doing, separated themselves from the LORD. They died spiritually. It seemed as if the enemy had won.

But, as Ezekiel would soon see, the enemy had not won. In His mercy, God was going to do the impossible: He would send His Spirit to breathe new life into these bones. They would live again as his mighty army on earth.

Brothers and sisters in Christ – we too were once like those bones Ezekiel saw in his vision. St. Paul says: *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world. . . 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-- it is by grace you have been saved.* (Ephesians 2:1-2,4-

5 NIV84).

Today is Pentecost – the day we celebrate the LORD pouring out His Spirit over the Church. It is only because God sent His Spirit to us through His Word and Sacraments that we stand spiritually alive and believing in Him today. Let us celebrate this truth, under the theme: **Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!** 1) *Though your bones are dry and your hope has perished,* 2) *I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.*

Part One: Though your bones are dry and your hope has perished.

Ezekiel, the author of our sermon text, was a prophet in Babylon during one of the darkest days in Judah's history. As I mentioned in the introduction, God's people had become proud and, following the world's enticements, turned their back on the LORD - worshipping false gods and pursuing worldly fortune.

The LORD sent many prophets, warning Judah of the danger they were in. He even threatened that if they didn't repent, the armies of Babylon would destroy their temple and take them captive. Sadly, even though Babylon's armies surrounded Jerusalem, the people stubbornly refused to believe that God would ever allow them to be conquered. They were so blinded by their pride and idolatry, that they could not see the obvious: they had lost their faith. And so, the LORD removed his protective hand from his people. Judah – the LORD's own chosen nation and mighty army to proclaim salvation on this earth, was conquered. The temple was destroyed, Jerusalem lay in ruins and the people were all being carried off as slaves.

The people were in shock. They declared, *"Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."* In other words, they were saying, "The temple, the sign of the LORD's protection and forgiving love, is gone. We stand under God's righteous wrath – doomed to die in hell forever." And, in a way, they were right: they had separated themselves from the LORD. They were spiritually dead - facing God's eternal damnation in hell for their unbelief and sin. But, as we will soon see, the LORD was merciful!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: note what happened to Judah and be warned. All too often we are tempted to take such pride in our faith that we become careless. Yes, we are saved by grace through faith - but this does not give us an excuse to sin!

Our enemies – the devil, world and our sinful nature – are constantly trying to tempt us away from Christ, and all too often we gladly follow. We let our guard down. We think we are strong, when we are actually weak. And if we forsake the armor God has given for our protection (His Word and Sacraments) we will soon follow the siren song of the world – away from the LORD who is our mighty fortress and into the open valley where so many others have died. May the LORD keep us from such a fate!

You see, we once belonged to that valley of bones. Why would we want to return to it again? Before our conversion, the Bible described us as being dead in our trespasses and sin. Like the rest of the world, we were lost – objects of God's wrath and doomed to hell. That is what we were, until God had mercy on us – just as He had mercy on Judah.

"Can these bones live?" the LORD asked Ezekiel as He looked over the valley. Humanly speaking, there was no way. But Ezekiel trusted in the LORD's power and mercy. If the LORD willed it, it could be done. And so Ezekiel responded: *O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.* In other words, "Only you, LORD, can make them live, if that is your will." And it was the LORD's will to make them alive – just as it was His will to make us spiritually alive through faith in Jesus.

Part Two: I will put my Spirit in you and you will live

Earlier in His book, Ezekiel recorded the LORD saying, *“As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?”* (Ezekiel 33:11, NIV84) The LORD didn’t want His people to die apart from Him. He wanted them to repent and live. So the LORD told Ezekiel to prophesy: *“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.*¹

And the LORD did what he promised – working in everything His people experienced for their spiritual deliverance. He graciously disciplined His people – exiling them to Babylon for 70 years in order that they might recognize the seriousness of their sins and repent. His Spirit working through His promises would turn their hearts back to Him in faith - so that they might live in hope once again!

And, when the time for their appointed exile had come to an end, the LORD allowed His people to return to Israel to live under His gracious care. He breathed His Spirit into their hearts so that they would live for Him alone, and not for another god. They went back to Israel rejoicing in the LORD’s salvation. They rebuilt the temple and, once again, became the beacon of God’s salvation on this earth. Their entire culture and faith pointed towards the coming Messiah – the Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world!

What the LORD did for Israel in bringing them to repentance and faith, He has also done for us! He didn’t like the fact that we were separated from Him because of our sins and unbelief. This is why He sent his Son into the world to win the righteousness and salvation we need to stand before God.

And how, exactly, did Jesus accomplish this? By perfectly keeping His Father’s law in our place and taking all our sins upon Himself so that he might suffer and die in order to pay for them all. And, having paid for our sins in full, Jesus rose from the grave. After ascending into heaven, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit through the preaching of the Gospel to breathe repentance, faith and salvation into our hearts.

Yes, just as God breathed life into Adam and Eve on the 6th day of creation, so also the Holy Spirit breathed new spiritual life into us through the Gospel so that we might know, believe and worship the triune God alone as our wonderful Savior LORD. The Holy Spirit made us alive in Christ Jesus and continues to live in us – working through His Word and Sacrament to strengthen our faith in Him.

And what the Holy Spirit did for us spiritually, he will also accomplish for us physically. You see, the Lord’s promise to open His people’s graves and put His Spirit in them that they might live and settle in their own land is not merely a poetical promise of how the LORD would bring Judah back from exile. This vision also serves as a reminder of a greater deliverance, a greater resurrection that we will most certainly experience when Christ comes again on the Last Day.

On that great and glorious Day, the LORD will issue a command – similar to what Ezekiel did in our text. And as the Spirit went out at Ezekiel’s word to accomplished what He said, so the Holy Spirit will go out with Christ’s call – reviving all the dead that they might appear before God’s glorious throne. Those who loved the world more than the LORD will be raised to face the punishment of eternal death in hell. But those who believed in the LORD will be raised to enjoy eternal life in the perfect, paradise God will create for us on that day!

Brothers and sisters in Christ: rejoice in the Holy Spirit's wonderful work in you: He raised you from spiritual death to spiritual life, i.e. from total unbelief to faith through the preaching of His Gospel. He did this so that you might be a member of His kingdom and enjoy His gracious presence forever!

Understand, however, that the Holy Spirit didn't just raise you to spiritual life so that you might live for yourself alone. Our text says that when the Spirit entered the dead, *they came to life and stood up on their feet--a vast army.*

Pentecost is the celebration of the out pouring of the Holy Spirit on His disciples to equip His Church with every gift necessary to be His army – an army to which we, by virtue of our faith, belong.

Now, every army has a duty, and we are no exception. But there is a big difference between our duty and that of every other army: earthly armies kill; our duty is to bring life.

Just as the LORD commanded Ezekiel to speak His life-giving Word to the dry bones in the valley of His vision, so also the Lord has commissioned each one of us to share His life-giving Gospel to all the spiritually dead that surround us that they too might live. Show your unbelieving friends and family members what God's Word says about their sin and need for a Savior. More importantly, tell them everything Jesus did to save them from their sin. As you call them to repentance and faith know that the Holy Spirit promises to work through your witnessing of His Word.

It is true that many will not want listen to the Gospel you share, but continue sharing it anyway. Why? For two reasons: 1) The LORD has commanded you to speak and 2) the Holy Spirit can do the impossible: He raises the dead to life. The Holy Spirit promises to work through our witness. In his good time, He will revive all of his chosen ones to faith – just as He did in Ezekiel's vision.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, rejoice in the wonderful resurrection to spiritual life the Holy Spirit accomplished in us and continues to accomplish through us. Remember the Word of the LORD: Even though your hope may have perished because of your sin, the LORD, in His mercy has put His Spirit in you that you might live. Amen.