

Pastor's Message – 3/26/23
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11

Once upon a time, they were relegated to “B” movies, but in recent years, zombies have hit the big time. You may have heard of “Night of the Living Dead” from 1968, the more recent “World War Z,” and others including, from 1986, “Redneck Zombies.” Zombies have even hit the television screen with “The Walking Dead” and even a couple shows from Europe. I am only partly aware of these—I had to look these up on the internet.

Zombies could be one of our themes from today's Bible readings. There are dead bones in our passage from Ezekiel which are raised to life. Lazarus is raised to life in the gospel of John which we did not read today. And Paul talks about life in the Holy Spirit though our bodies will die. Death is everywhere. So is being raised from the dead. Not “Zombie-raised” to become “undead,” but truly raised to live as we had never lived before.

Sadly, chapter 37 of Ezekiel begins in a lifeless place. The passage seems more like a judgment than a blessing when the prophet reports that The LORD took hold of me, and I was carried away by the Spirit of the LORD to a valley filled with bones. He led me all around among the bones that covered the valley floor. They were scattered everywhere across the ground and were completely dried out.” (vv. 1-2).

Death was everywhere Ezekiel could see. He was not overlooking “the valley of dry bones” from a height as some artists have depicted it. The Spirit of God had placed him in the midst of the valley, and on every side, it was dry bones. He was not going to prophesy over these bones from a distance, but in the midst of what could only be described as a mass grave. It was a place of horror to which the Spirit had taken him.

“Son of man, can these bones become living people again?” God asks the prophet (Ezekiel 37:3). You can imagine that there is complete silence at this point, with Ezekiel wondering, “Is this a trick question, or what?” Dry, dead, disconnected, desiccated bones – can they live?

But Ezekiel knows the unlimited and unpredictable power of the one Lord God, so he's not going to blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. He says, quite diplomatically, “O Sovereign LORD . . ., you alone know the answer to that.” (v. 3).

So God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones that God will bring them back to life, reconnecting bone to bone, adding flesh and sinews and skin, and ultimately breathing life into them, after Ezekiel also prophesied to breath God's word to “Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again” (verse 9). And so they do, coming to life, standing on their feet and becoming “a great army” (verse 10).

But the bizarre story of the Spirit's work doesn't end there. It becomes an object lesson of what God intends to do for the Israelite people sent into exile in Babylon, a people who consider themselves dead to any form of life they had known before, dead perhaps, even to their God. God's plan would take them from their graves and bring them home.

Death is never only and not only physical. The more difficult resurrection may be the resurrection of destroyed identity, obliterated culture, and crushed spirits. It was this resurrection God would surely perform for God's people (v 14).

This resurrection God still performs today among peoples everywhere whose identity is destroyed, whose culture becomes obliterated by violence, whose spirits are crushed.

Since the beginning of time, God's word has shown creative, life-giving power. In the first chapter of Genesis, God says, "Let there be light," and there is light -- the word of God creates a new reality, bringing light into darkness (Genesis 1:3).

Through the prophet Isaiah, God promises that "my word ... shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that for which I purpose" (Isaiah 55:11). "In the beginning was the Word," says the gospel of John, "and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... All things came into being through him" (1:1,3).

Throughout the Bible, we hear that the word of God has life-giving power.

But we sometimes overlook this in a world so full of empty, meaningless, trivial or untrustworthy words. A flood of words comes at us constantly, through television, radio, websites, billboards, text messages, and ads on our smart phones and computers. We know that some of these words are untrue, others are destructive, and still others are trying to manipulate us. The result is that we don't have a very high opinion of words.

But Ezekiel is willing to trust the word of God. In the middle of his own dry, dusty, lifeless experience in exile, he's willing to put his faith in the God who says to the bones, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Look! I am going to put breath into you and make you live again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD." (vv. 5-6).

God promises to cause breath to enter the bones – and it happens.

The key is God's Spirit — an awesome, life-giving power that can bring hope to the hopeless and life to the most disconnected and desiccated of bones. This is the Spirit that Ezekiel calls upon when he says, "Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies" — in the original Hebrew, the exact same word is used for wind, breath and spirit. This is the Spirit that brings the dead to life, because it is the wind-breath-spirit of God that fills the dead bodies and causes them to stand on their feet, "a great army."

So the answer to God's original question to Ezekiel is really quite simple. "Son of man, can these bones become living people again?" Yes, if they're filled with the Spirit of God.

The very same is true for us. Today's passage is not an excerpt from a prophetic self-help book, one which instructs us to reform, reinvent or reorganize ourselves into a more efficient or effective organization. No, it's a passage that challenges us to open ourselves to the life-giving power of God's Spirit, a Holy Spirit that comes to us for one purpose only: so that we will know that God is the LORD (v. 6).

That's why God gives life to the bones: so that they will know that God is God.

That's why God brings the people of Israel to their homeland: so that they will know that God will act.

That's why God gives a child to senior citizens named Abraham and Sarah: so that they will know that nothing is too wonderful for the Lord (Genesis 18:14).

That's why God gives a son to a virgin named Mary: so that she will know that nothing is impossible with God (Luke 1:37).

That's why God fills us with his life-giving Spirit: so that we will know that God is alive and well and active — right here, right now.

What is dead for you? Where are the dead bones in your life? What seems beyond redeeming?

Paul points to one of the places where we all continue to find ourselves drying out in mass graves: our very minds, when set on our sinful nature rather than on the Spirit.

Paul contrasts the life of the flesh, which draws from sin and leads to death, with the life of the Spirit, which draws from the Spirit of Christ and leads to righteousness. This is not a dualist rejection of the body, but rather a refusal to be controlled by its impulses. "God who raised Jesus from the dead will give life to our mortal bodies through the Spirit (vs. 11)."

In Paul's message and at the heart of our passage from Ezekiel is the message "God is able."

- When we are lost, God is able to find us.
- When we're crushed by guilt, God is able to lift this burden.
- When we're without vision, God is able to inspire us.
- When we're overwhelmed, God is able to calm us.
- When we're attacked, God is able to deliver us.
- When we're feeling disconnected, desiccated and discouraged, God is able to reconnect us, refresh us and revive us.

God can take death itself, and transform it into life. God is able.

What do these dry bones tell us about who we are as a congregation?

Where do we need the Spirit of God to be at work among us?

What can new life look like, after we open ourselves to the power of the Spirit?

God says to Ezekiel, "Son of man, these bones represent the people of Israel." God says to us today, "Children of man, these bones are the whole

congregation of this church.” When our bones are dried up, our spirits are scattered, our hope is lost, and we are feeling completely cut off, at that precise moment the challenge for us is to turn to God and ask him to fill us with his Spirit. The promise is that God will put his Spirit within us and we will live, and then we will know that the Lord has spoken and will act.

God can bring life to bones and to us. God is able.

There is good news today, always good news in the wonderful story of Ezekiel and the dry bones. God will not let the dry bones stay dry and hopeless! God will let not our bones stay dry. Through the Holy Spirit the bones get fresh breath! We dry bones and all our other friends who have been dried out by sadnesses and injustice, we have a future!

God will take our impossible circumstances and make something out of it, giving us a fresh start. God speaks, the Spirit moves and the dry bones begin a’rattlin’. Can you hear them? Can you hear the dry bones of this Congregation beginning to rattle?

Easter is still two weeks away from this sermon. But this text asks the question of this season: Can life come into death? Biblical scholar Iain Duguid notes the connection between the valley, the tomb, and our lives today: “For Ezekiel, what happened to the bones first happened to him. So it is with us: What God does for the Christian, he has first of all done for Jesus.”

God was willing to overlook generations of Israel’s dry and decaying spiritual life. He would give them undeserved blessing again.

Life into death. God’s mission wasn’t just forgiveness through his Son’s death. It was new life through Jesus’ resurrection.

Life into death. For Christians today, death isn’t the final verdict. Believers can always have hope. No situation is beyond God’s reach. What is not is not what shall be.

Life into death. But at the point of renewed hope for life, full life isn’t yet there.

We have in our lessons today the Easter message in a nutshell. The Easter celebration, just two weeks away, is all about Jesus conquering death. Now that conquest is passed to us by the Holy Spirit who connects us with Jesus. Next time we are in despair about death fearing it or the meaninglessness of life, we can remember how Jesus has taken us off the death track, and in His giving us all that He has there are things in our lives, things we have done, that are eternal and will not pass away.

We may see a valley of dry bones — but what God can do with even this! Take hope! God is at work! Dem’ bones are rattlin’!