

You Shall Know That I Am the Lord

Ezekiel 37:1-14

March 9, 2008

I.

Usually I preach about the Gospel reading rather than one of the other lessons. And today's Gospel certainly has some important messages in it. One of them is Jesus' proclamation that "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die."

But as important as John's Gospel is, today I want to talk about the Old Testament reading from Ezekiel. It's probably the most well-known part of the Book of Ezekiel, and its story has appeared in many parts of contemporary society.

The Negro spiritual, "Dem Bones," is drawn directly from this reading. Children's books use it to teach human anatomy. There's an award winning comic strip in Israel called "Dry Bones." And of course, for those in my generation, we all probably have heard the recording of "Them Bones" by Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians, complete with bells, wood blocks, rattles, washboards, anvils, and gongs.

This reading brings to mind a letter recently sent by the government to a person who had been receiving food stamps each month. The letter said "Your food stamps will terminate in March because we have been notified of your death. May God bless you. You may reapply if your circumstances change."

Well, the circumstances of those bones in Ezekiel's vision certainly did change, didn't they? At the beginning they were lying bleached and dry on the desert floor, and at the end they were living breathing people.

II.

Before talking more about the reading, however, it might be useful to briefly review some of the background that led up to it. Prior to about 1000 BC, the Hebrew tribes in the holy land were not very well organized and were threatened by their neighbors. Then about that time David became king of a region in the south called Judah, and within three years he had united the northern and southern territories into a single powerful nation called Israel. This was the King David of biblical fame.

Israel continued as a powerful force in the region throughout David's life and the life of his son, Solomon, who succeeded him as king. During this time Israel prospered beyond anyone's expectations. To this day, movies are made about King Solomon's gold.

Then, in 922 BC Solomon died and everything fell apart. To make a long story short, civil war broke out and the once powerful nation of Israel was divided into two second-rate countries, north and south. The northern country kept the name of Israel, and the southern country took back the old name of Judah. Scripture tells us that over the succeeding centuries, all of the kings of Israel in the north did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and most of the kings of Judah in the south were the same.

This led to the age of the prophets, of which Ezekiel was one. God called his prophets to testify to the leaders and people in both nations that they were sinking into sin, which consisted mostly of idol worship, pagan practices, and social injustice to their own people. These prophets called the people back into obedience, and proclaimed God's wrath and justice if they continued in their evil ways.

Well, notwithstanding the prophets, the kings and people did not repent and return to the Lord. In 722 BC the northern nation of Israel was conquered and completely destroyed by the Assyrians. Ten of the historic twelve tribes of Israel were dispersed or taken into captivity, and have never been heard from since, even to this day.

The southern nation of Judah survived for a while, but its days also were numbered. And here we get into today's reading, for Ezekiel was a prophet in Judah. He began by warning the people that they were doomed to destruction because of their sins against God. Then he was captured by the Babylonians and taken into exile in Babylon. A few years later, in 586 BC, the entire nation was completely conquered, the Temple of Solomon was destroyed, and the national catastrophe was complete.

And I want to emphasize that this was the end of the mighty nation of Israel that King David built almost five hundred years earlier. Nothing was left. The monarchy was gone. The temple was gone. Only two of the original twelve tribes of Israel were able to hold themselves together. Ten were lost forever. To quote today's reading, the Jews in captivity were saying, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

After a few years, God sent a vision to Ezekiel in Babylon, and it contained a new message. That vision and its message is the story in today's reading. Whereas Ezekiel had been preaching doom, despair, and desolation for years, this new vision of the valley of the dry bones proclaimed hope, renewal, and transformation.

And the vision made clear there was nothing the Jews could do on their own to save themselves. Their destruction could not be reversed by any human action. The images of the dry bones coming to life were meant to show that only through God did even a remnant of the Jewish people have any hope.

We can see similarities to our own preparations for Good Friday and Easter. Just as the Jewish nation could only be restored by God's grace, so also we are saved only by God's grace in sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for us. And while this story of the dry bones foretold restoration of the nation rather than individual resurrection, it does demonstrate the mighty power of a sovereign God, full of grace and love.

III.

With that brief history, let's look at the reading. After leading Ezekiel to inspect the dry bones and enabling him to appreciate the desolation of the scene, God asked the seemingly absurd question, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel ducked the question, and said that God alone knows. Then he was told by God to prophesy to the bones and proclaim God's word.

Ezekiel spoke to the bones, and declared that they would be re-created with sinews, flesh, skin, and breath. And through him God said that they "shall know that I am the Lord." Then, amidst a noisy rattling, the bones miraculously and supernaturally joined together and became flesh.

This is the image we get in the songs and stories today; the ankle bone connected to the leg bone, and so on. But wait. The bones were not alive, they were just animated. God commanded a second prophesy, and Ezekiel called forth the breath of God from the four winds, which came and entered the bodies and caused the vast multitude to live and stand.

God spoke again and explained that the bones were the "whole house of Israel," which had been languishing in exile with no hope. After this, God instructed Ezekiel to prophesy once more, this time to the people represented by the restored bones, and to proclaim that God would open their graves and restore them to the land of Israel. The prophesy again commanded "you shall know that I am the Lord."

The story then ends with a majestic and unconditional imperative that God's spirit "will" be within the remnant; that it "will live;" that God "will place" them on their own soil." And for the third time, God said that they shall know he is the Lord.

So we see that this reading from Ezekiel described the people in absolute despair, and then foretold their salvation with images that were not humanly possible to create. Restoration of the Jewish people would be by God's grace and not through good behavior. They were powerless on their own. This is a story of God's grace and power, and God transformed Ezekiel from a prophet of doom into a messenger of divine restoration and renewal. Through God, and God alone, the people were given hope.

IV.

God can restore and renew us in the same way. God's work in the valley of dry bones shows there can be hope, even if we see none. God, by his grace and word, can furnish courage and comfort for every problem and affliction. And while those problems or afflictions might not miraculously disappear, we can know God's peace and have strength to deal with our difficulties.

And we do have dry bones in our lives from time to time, don't we? I developed this same theme two weeks ago when I talked about Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, and I asked, "What do we do when the well runs dry?" Today's reading presents a similar question. What do we do with these dry bones that make us think we have no hope? What do we do when things just seem to be beyond us?

The answer is slightly different here. If we recall the sermon two weeks ago, we heard that Jesus offers living water, spiritual refreshment, that can see us through whatever we might face in this world and bring us to share his glory in the next. This week we focus on our own inability to do anything in our own strength.

This complete dependence on God described the situation in which the Jewish people found themselves. They were at the end of their rope. Dry bones were everywhere. And when they looked at their circumstances through their own eyes they knew the bones could not live. There was nothing they could do. They were in captivity for life without parole, so to speak.

But God's word delivered through Ezekiel's vision dramatically changed everything. It showed that while God was grieved by the sins and disobedience of the Jewish people, he would not forget them. It showed that even though they thought they had lost everything forever, God's grace would be sufficient.

V.

At times we probably have felt like the people in today's reading. Perhaps some of us feel that way now. And, to use the imagery of today's reading, we might ask ourselves, "How can these bones live?" The answer now, as it was then, is "Lord, you alone know."

God's work in the valley of the dry bones shows there always is hope even if we see none. Dry bones in the symbolic sense are everywhere. We encounter them in our daily lives, and we must look at our circumstances through God's eyes; not our own. Through our own efforts the bones cannot live. Through God, however, all things are possible.

But today we, unlike the exiles, have Jesus Christ to restore us. That's evident from the Gospel reading about Lazarus. But like the exiles, the words that God proclaimed to them more than 2,500 years ago also must resonate with us: "And you shall know that I am the Lord." *Amen.*