

These Bones Can Live

Ezekiel 37:1-14
October 31, 2010

I.

On most of the coast today is Halloween. It comes from an ancient Celtic tradition that marks the change of seasons. It's also known in the church as All Hallows Eve, the night before All Saints Day, which we will celebrate in church next Sunday.

And you might know that the Episcopal Church actually has a worship service for tonight; for All Hallows Eve. It's at page 108 of the Book of Occasional Services, and the instructions at the beginning say, "Suitable festivities may take place before or after this service, and a visit may be made to a cemetery or burial place." Perhaps next year.

But if we had such a service tonight, it would start with the church in darkness and a few candles. We would hear readings about King Saul's séance with the Witch of Endor (1 Sa. 28:3-25), followed by the spirit vision of Job's friend Eliphaz (Job 4:12-21), and the War in Heaven where Michael and his holy angels threw Satan and his evil angels down to earth (Rev. 12:7-12).

And we also would hear today's Old Testament reading about the prophet Ezekiel and his visit to the valley of dry bones. This is one of the most vivid and graphic stories in the Bible, and has found its way into many parts of contemporary society.

The traditional spiritual, "Dem Bones," comes from this reading. Teachers use it to explain human anatomy to children. There's an award winning comic strip in Israel called "Dry Bones." And many of us 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 November because we have been notified of your death. You may reapply if your circumstances change."

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

II.

Let's review this remarkable reading. Through a vision God led Ezekiel to a valley that appeared to be the scene of an ancient battle. It was filled with skeletons of slain warriors. They were everywhere, and long ago the bones had been picked clean.

And then after showing Ezekiel the great expanse of dry bones, God asked the seemingly absurd question, "Can these bones live?" Well, Ezekiel wisely ducked the question, and said God alone knows. Then God told him to prophesy to the bones, and to proclaim God's word to them.

But first, God said the bones would live. He said he would lay sinews and flesh upon them. He would cover them with skin and put breath in them, and they would know that he is the Lord. This type of imagery could be a scene in a Halloween movie, couldn't it?

So Ezekiel spoke to the bones as he had been told, and don't we wish we could have seen what happened next. There was a noisy rattling from all over the valley, and all the bones started moving around and miraculously joined together in all the right places, and flesh and skin appeared from nowhere and covered them.

This is the image in songs and stories today; the foot bone connected to the ankle bone, the ankle bone connected to the leg bone, and so on. But wait. The bones were not yet alive. They were now bodies, but still laid there motionless, on the ground, seemingly waiting for something.

So God gave another command, and told Ezekiel to invoke God's spirit and call forth God's breath from the four winds. We don't know how it worked, but perhaps something veiled and gossamer settled over the valley and drifted onto the bones, and the vast multitude lived and stood.

And the reading ended with God explaining that the old dry bones were the people of Israel as they existed at the time, banished and languishing in exile. Then he said the restored bones and bodies with new life in them were the people of Israel as they would be in the future when God brought them out of their graves in exile, and restored them in freedom to their lands.

III.

So, what's the reason for this extraordinary prophetic vision? Why were the Jews in exile? It's a long story, but we can get the picture from three examples of Hebrew history. We can start when God first delivered the Hebrews out of captivity in Egypt and Moses led them through the desert to Mt. Sinai.

And while Moses was on top of the mountain talking with God and receiving the Ten Commandments, how did the Hebrew people show their gratitude to God? They made a golden calf and started to worship that instead of God! (Ex. 32:4) That was a violation of the very first commandment. Certainly the head bone was not connected to the neck bone on that one.

This was just the beginning of Jewish disobedience. And even though Moses was able to intercede with God on behalf of the people to forestall God's wrath, the pattern was set.

Now we can fast forward through the centuries to when the Jewish people had taken the promised land, and were expanding throughout the region. This was the time of the Judges in the Bible where we find the stories of Deborah, and Gideon, and Samson and Delilah.

Again, the Bible tells of continuing cycles of disobedience, punishment, repentance, deliverance, and disobedience again. Time and again the people did evil in the sight of the Lord by worshipping other gods, and the Lord delivered them into the hands of their enemies, only to restore them after they repented.

Things changed briefly for the better during the time of King David and his son Solomon, but then Solomon also did evil in the sight of the Lord. He worshipped foreign gods and encouraged others to do so. As a result, after Solomon died everything began to fall apart.

And to summarize it all, civil war broke out and the once powerful nation of Israel split into two second-rate countries, north and south. Over the succeeding centuries, all the kings of the north did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and most of the kings of the south were the same.

This also was the age of the prophets, of which Ezekiel in today's reading was one. God called them to warn the leaders and people in both nations against the sins of idol worship, pagan practices, and oppression of their own people. These prophets foretold God's wrath if the people continued in their evil ways.

Well, the kings and people ignored the prophets and continued to do whatever they wanted. They did not repent and return to the Lord, and so the northern nation was conquered and destroyed by the Assyrians. Then the Babylonians conquered the southern nation, the Temple was destroyed, the people were taken away into captivity, and God's judgment was complete.

This was the catastrophic end of the great world power King David built almost five hundred years earlier. Nothing was left. God did not ignore rejection. To quote today's reading, the Jews in exile were saying, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."

And here we are introduced to Ezekiel, who also was in exile and captivity. While he was there God sent a vision to him, and that vision was described in today's reading. Unlike Ezekiel's earlier prophecies of doom and despair before he was captured, however, this new vision of the valley of the dry bones received in exile proclaimed hope, renewal, and transformation to come.

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

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 occasionally have dry bones in our lives, don't we? Perhaps we sometimes feel like those Hebrews in exile felt. What do we do with these dry bones that might leave us with no hope? What do we do when things just seem to be beyond us?

We can consider two things. First, we can remember the fate in which the Jewish people found themselves. They were at the end of the line. The dry bones of their sins 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 changed everything. It showed that while God was grieved by their sins and disobedience, he would not forget his people and he eventually would restore them. The same applies to us. We also are called to look at our circumstances through God's eyes; not our own even though we often are tempted to do otherwise.

This leads to the second point. Unlike those exiles in Babylon, we also have Jesus Christ to support and guide us. Our faith in him always can sustain us. You all have heard me describe God's blessings through Christ many times in many ways. Three weeks ago I spoke on one of my favorite biblical passages, which is from First Thessalonians. I would like to quote it again.

"Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil. May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (5:16-23).

And so, we have assurance in God. Even though at times we might feel that the so-called dry bones in our lives cannot live, we also know that through God's grace, given in our Lord and Savior, all things are possible. There always is hope when we turn to God. *Amen.*