

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Ezekiel 37:1-14 *The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. ² And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD." ⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. ¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."*

What's the best way to learn about someone? I suppose the obvious answer would be to ask them questions. Here we are on Promotion and Graduation Sunday, the students have all spent the last nine or so months doing just that: answering questions. Any teacher would probably tell you the best way to figure out what a student knows is to ask them questions and listen to their answers.

But beyond that, there could be other methods for learning about a person. Observation—watching how they interact with others, that tells you a lot about someone. Asking others about them; close friends of an individual could usually tell you everything you need to know about them. I suppose we could even say checking out their social media profiles. That usually reveals quite a bit about us, perhaps more than we would like.

And much further on down the list, there's something else that reveals a great deal of information about us, and that's our bones. A little cryptic perhaps, yet there's an entire field of research which is largely dedicated to that idea—archaeology—the study of ancient artifacts and physical remains which can tell you quite a bit about a person or an animal species or a particular culture or an entire geographical region. Studying the bones can tell you how a living thing died, it can reveal medical history, it can tell about dietary habits, it can uncover ancient climates or crimes or natural disasters. All from bones—the bones tell a story.

Now, I don't know any archaeologists, but I believe any of them would tell you exactly that: the bones tell a story. Or radiologists, chiropractors, coroners, forensic investigators—they all might say the same. Or even God might say the same. After all, it was using bones that God gave to the prophet Ezekiel a lesson in our text this morning. He had Ezekiel play archeologist, showing him a field of dry, dead bones. Ezekiel might have wanted to look away from that morbid scene, but God wanted him to watch to see what would happen next, for, in the words of our theme: **The Bones Tell Our Story.**

Now, as a dad of several young boys, I think every day I have to spend time watching as my sons try to accomplish something that I'm just not sure they'll be able to do. Whether it be the youngest trying to twist a cap on an empty bottle or attempting to climb up a slide, or the older two trying to lift some relatively heavy object onto the table or some other feat of strength or coordination that they just don't have yet. And I always find myself weighing out two options, and since many of you are parents, you probably know what the options are: you either step in and do it for them so that it can just be over and done with, or you let them struggle with it and learn and be better equipped the next time. Which choice I make usually is determined by how much time I have, or rather, how patient I'm feeling in that moment. But I think we'd all agree that, in general, letting a person struggle through the task, trying to figure it out for themselves, to work and to fail and to try again—that's going to be much better for them in the long-run.

And that's true in most areas of life: in sports, in schoolwork, in everyday tasks. But there's one area of life where, if a person is left only to their own devices, they will fail every single time. And that's in our spiritual lives. Turning back to the bones in our text, they tell us story about ourselves. Picking up at verse 1: ***"The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry."***

So, Ezekiel comes across these bones, and these aren't fresh kills or anything like that. They've been there for a long time as evidenced by the fact that these bones are very dry. Old, dead bones. But Ezekiel doesn't need to perform any forensic investigation upon the corpses, for God tells Ezekiel everything he needs to know. God says, in verse 11, ***"Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.'"***

So, these bones told the story of a people that were still alive. That was the people of Israel, a nation who by-in-large had determined to set about their spiritual lives with a do-it-yourself strategy. They picked and chose what gods they wanted to worship, and their additional worship of the one true God involved nothing resembling actual faith, instead it was a religion based upon, "I'll go through all these motions for God, and that should be good enough." But they were mistaken. And because of their faithlessness and total lack of reliance on God, the Lord God sent them a wake-up call. He allowed the ruthless Babylonian armies to come and destroy their homes and take them hostage to Babylon. There they were imprisoned and forced into labor camps and stripped of any national identity, and in general were reminded that by themselves they were as helpless as a field of dry dead bones. Locked away in Babylon, they cried, ***"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off."***

Do you ever feel like the children of Israel did? Have things turned out for you the way that you envisioned them? Perhaps the problems in your life seem to have surpassed the joys. The money flowing in can't keep up with the money flowing out. Society keeps rapidly changing, and you find yourself more and more feeling like a stranger in your own country. A feeling of helplessness overcomes you, and maybe *you* too want to cry out, ***"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost."***

Well, in reference to this field of bones, God asks Ezekiel this searching question, ***"Can these bones live?"*** I know how I would answer. Looking at a long-dead pile of bones, the answer would seem obvious. "No." Almost as obvious as the answer to that question would be when asked about our own lives. When surveying our own seemingly hopeless situations, when our confidence is shaken and any escape from our current circumstances seems to be cut off—if the question were posed about your

life, ***“Can these bones live?”*** I’m afraid our answer is, more often than not, a readily-given, “No.” “No, these bones cannot live. For all hope is lost.”

And that would be true for anyone who would stand apart from God. That would be the story our bones would tell were God not in the picture. Hopeless, dead, incapable of doing anything. Without God we would spend this life wasting away, rotting in the stench of our own sinful flesh, hopelessly meandering toward a meaningless death and eventually, just a pile of our own dead bones. Thankfully, we are not alone. God asks Ezekiel the question, ***“Can these bones live?”*** And rather than giving the seemingly obvious answer, Ezekiel simply entrusts it to God. ***“O Lord GOD, you know.”***

And that was a good answer, for without God—those bones, our bones—all of them are nothing but dry bones. But WITH God, hope is restored, life is given where death once reigned! That’s the imagery which God presents in vivid detail in our text. ***“Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the LORD.” So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”***

I remember when the movie the *Pirates of the Caribbean* first came out back in 2003. I’m not sure how many of you have seen it, but involves a group of marauding zombie pirates, eternally dead because of an ancient pirate curse. They look like normal people, or normal pirates, in the daylight, but when exposed to the moonlight, they’re revealed for what they really are, just bones. Moving, walking, talking, pillaging bones of pirates. I’m not sure how well the computer-generated imagery and effects hold up some 18 years later, but at the time, that movie was state-of-the-art. Never before had anyone seen dead bones come to life with such amazing detail.

Nobody, except for Ezekiel, I suppose. Some 2500 years before the *Pirates of the Caribbean* came out, God was treating the prophet to a show of bones coming to life, no CGI required. And as amazed as I was at 11-years-old watching that display on the big screen, I imagine Ezekiel’s reaction must have been even greater. God commands him to speak to the bones, and he does. Then bones, skittering across the earth joining to one another, standing up at attention; once dry, dead bones being covered with tendons and ligaments and muscles and skin. “Prophesy again, Ezekiel,” and he does, and suddenly he’s no longer alone in that valley but joined by an army of living, breathing people.

Now, that was pretty dramatic. Dramatic kind of like many of the events going on in our text from Acts: tongues of fire, the wind, the speaking in all those foreign languages. That would certainly seem to be the big deal of the day, that would certainly seem to be the focus, just as this miraculous resurrection before Ezekiel’s eyes would seem to be the really noteworthy event. But in fact, in verse 6, after the sinews and flesh and skin and breath were all mentioned, the *climactic* thing in verse 6 is this: ***“And you shall know that I am the LORD.”*** It comes up the same way in verse 13 and in verse 14, where you have the graves being opened, people coming back to life, ***“And you shall know that I am the LORD.”***

Now it doesn't seem so dramatic, so exciting, so thrilling to come to **"know the LORD,"** as it would be exciting to see a bunch of dead bones rise up and become a great army. That seems much more dramatic, just as on Pentecost the languages and the wind and the flames of fire *seem* like the big deal. They seem like the exciting thing of the day. It doesn't seem nearly so exciting to think about people coming to know the Lord. But in fact, here in the Old Testament reading, that *IS* the climactic element. The big deal isn't the big show. The big deal is people coming to know the Lord rightly. And that certainly is the center of what was going on at that first Pentecost.

The disciples spoke in foreign tongues, and by the way, it wasn't the tongues of angels, it wasn't some supernatural prayer language, it was words which the people could understand readily. And they were amazed, **"How is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?"** And the climactic element was the message: **"Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."**

That's the really miraculous event of Pentecost and of each of our lives as well. For we are all the same: whether that be the Israelites in Babylon, the people at the first Pentecost—the Parthians and Medes and Elamites and visitors from Rome and so on—or us here today. We are all of us dry dead bones. As Jesus says to all of us, **"Apart from me you can do nothing."** (John 15:5) Or as the Apostle Paul testifies, **"You were dead in the trespasses and sins."** (Ephesians 2:1) Here we are, an army of dry dead bones, any hope lost long ago. We look around us and can hardly find any reason for joy or optimism at all.

But we are not alone. We are never alone. Therefore, we are not without hope. For God came to us in our hopeless situation. The Son of God walked among this army of the living dead and determined to take our place instead. He proved what the Lord God was really like, so that we may know the Lord rightly: He's the God who is not willing that any should perish, (2 Peter 3:9) He's the eternally living One who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:4) So He restored hope to the dead by laying down His own life.

And that's the big deal. That God would come down and bring life to dry bones such as we. That God would declare to us, **"I will open your graves and raise from your graves, O my people. I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live, I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD."** That's the big deal. That God would declare that finally and ultimately, there is enduring hope for all of us. For in this life we look for hopes and joys that only end up disappointing us, but God promises us *new* life. The Spirit of God, the breath of life has come to us now. Our lives no longer need to be characterized by lifelessness or despair, for new life has come. We are baptized. We have life. We have hope. God has spoken His Word to each of our hearts, and as He has said it, it is done: **"I will put my Spirit within you."**

You see then, these bones tell a story. Not just *a* story, they tell *your* story. And the day will come, when God will truly open *your* graves and bring *you* to a new land as He has said. That will be not be a vision at all, but it will be the literal conclusion to your story here. Someday, your dry, dead bones, will be raised to life, to dwell in the house of Lord forever. For as Jesus Christ our Savior has risen from the dead as He said, He has also said that He will raise our bones to life and take us with Him to be the living, breathing saints surrounding the throne of God. May God grant it. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."
(Philippians 4:7) Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh
Pentecost/Promotion Sunday
May 23, 2021