

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 6, 2014
Fifth Sunday in Lent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 130
Romans 6:16-23
John 11:17-44

Today's reading from Ezekiel might be one of the more compelling passages in all the Old Testament. It tells about the restoring of God's people to life in the valley of dry bones.

But the full significance of this text emerges primarily from the context in which it arises. In 597 B.C., the mighty Babylonians swept into Judah and sacked the city of Jerusalem. The prophet Ezekiel was a leading citizen of Jerusalem at the time, and he was taken captive with the first of what turned out to be three deportations of the people from the land.

It is hard for us to appreciate the full impact that the exile had on the children of Israel. First, their land -- the land they considered promised since the time of Abraham -- has now been invaded and taken from them. They are now captives of foreign invaders, and are forcibly removed from their homes and land.

Second, the Temple -- the sacred place where God had caused his Name to dwell -- now lies in ashes and ruins. Smoldering embers are all that remain to remind God's people of their sacred place.

Third, the last of the Davidic kings is now a captive. The Old Testament promise that a king from David's line would rule on the throne forever seems a moot point now.

I don't think we would be exaggerating to say that *the impact of the exile, in effect, was to convince the people that their storied relationship with God (dating back to Abraham) had come to an end.* For all intents and purposes, it was over!

Seen this way, the people's experience of captivity is tantamount to *death*. The valley of dry bones is a fitting image for the people's emotional and spiritual condition, and a profound backdrop for our story.

In the story, God takes Ezekiel out into a deserted valley. He shows Ezekiel around this valley floor, which is littered with old, dry bones. The prophet says, "they were scattered everywhere across the ground." The image is one of complete desolation and death. It is a mirror image of the people's experience as they are in captivity.

In this experience of death, God asks Ezekiel a question: "Can these bones become living people again?"

Ezekiel says, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know the answer to that." I don't think Ezekiel is trying to dodge the Lord's question; he is recognizing God's sovereignty and confessing that God alone holds the key to life.

At any rate, God then goes to work. He has Ezekiel speak to the bones, and a rattling noise permeates the valley. The bones come together and reattach themselves. Then muscle and flesh and skin follow.

Then God has the prophet call the breath from the four winds to breathe into the bodies so that they may live again, and he gives them this message: *“I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel...I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live and return home to your own land” (vv. 12, 14a). Then you will know that I am the LORD.”*

This story is an amazing testimony to the grace and mercy of God. The children of Israel -- God’s chosen people -- considered themselves and their relationship with God as good as dead. But the Spirit of God gave them new life and a new start, *and he did so on this side of the grave.*

But people can also be enlivened by the Spirit of God *from the other side of the grave.* Such was the case for Lazarus.

Jesus receives word that Lazarus is ill, but he waits two days before going to him. In the meantime, he dies.

But Jesus’ purpose mirrors that of God as he works with Ezekiel in the Old Testament lesson. There God tells Ezekiel, *“I’ll bring these dead bones back to life, so that then the people will know that I am the Lord.”*

Here Jesus says, “Lazarus’ illness will not end in death. No, it is for the glory of God. I, the Son of God, will receive glory for this.” This is reminiscent of John’s Gospel (chapter 9), where Jesus says that the man born blind was so in order that God’s glory might be seen in him.

These lessons remind us of a truth about God’s ability to bring life out of death. Resurrection is not only about our final, physical death and what happens to us at that point. **Resurrection is also (and always) about the continual miraculous raisings and renewals that happen throughout our lives.**

Resurrection is about the transformation that happens to us *in the flesh* as we experience many smaller “deaths” which happen to us along the way of life -- the loss of loved ones, the loss of a job, a divorce, a forced move, a debilitating illness, disappointing setbacks of one sort or another.

These “deaths” force us to give up old ways of thinking and living that no longer work. They bring about, albeit painfully, the work of inner transformation in our lives, transformation that includes growth, but also pain, anger, grieving, and regret. But after these “deaths,” we become new people. We are changed. Jesus’ words spoken about Lazarus become true of us: “Unbind him. Let him go.”

There is another truth about God’s power to bring life from death that we must not miss.

The truth is that resurrection power is neither cute nor pretty. Resurrection power is not about images on Hallmark cards of pastel eggs and bunnies.

Resurrection power is necessary precisely because the stench of death fills the air. Resurrection power is needed because the valleys of our lives are littered with old bones that remind us of what once was but is no more.

Resurrection power is therefore not delicate or sentimental. For the new life of the Spirit comes not when we are at our *best* but when we are at our *worst* -- when the stench of death fills the air and all that can be seen in the valley is dry, old, bones.

There is nothing cute about the power of God to bring life from death. But when we are dying, cute is not what we need. We need nothing less than the raw, supernatural power of God. The kind of power that lifts a stinking dead man out of his grave clothes and returns him to his sisters. The kind of power that puts flesh on dead bones and breathes life into the valley of death.

As we conclude this morning, I invite you to close your eyes for just a moment. In the quietness of this moment, I invite you to see a picture in your mind's eye of a circumstance in your life (or the life of someone you know) that appears hopeless just now. A circumstance that appears as though it is just another bone waiting to be tossed onto the valley floor. A circumstance where the grave clothes appear to be near.

Now I want you to hear the words of Jesus: **“This situation is not unto death, but rather that the glory of God might be revealed.”**

As you come to the Lord’s Table, reach out in faith and claim this promise. Experience the Lord’s gracious touch on your life. Let his healing grace bring new life to your soul.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.