First Presbyterian Church of Soda Springs

3/26/23

You Shall Live

Ezekiel 37:1-14

**37**The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. **2**He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. **3**He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” **4**Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. **5**Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath[a] to enter you, and you shall live. **6**I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath[b] in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

**7**So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. **8**I looked, and 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, mortal, and say to the breath:[c] Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” **10**I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

**11**Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ **12**Therefore prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. **13**And you shall know that I am the Lord when I open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people. **14**I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

Let me start out by saying that I don’t often preach from the Old Testament. It’s not that the Hebrew Bible doesn’t have value, or much to teach us, it’s simply a matter of whether a particular passage resonates and dovetails with what I see happening in the world around us. I’d say that 98% of the time, the Gospel, or Epistle, readings best meet that criteria.

Today, though, I chose the Ezekiel reading for a couple of reasons. First, Ezekiel certainly had a flair for the dramatic, which I find intriguing. This particular passage is, arguably, one of the most dramatic and vivid texts in scripture, outside of the book of Revelation. The second reason is that this fits in with the overarching theme I’ve been focusing on, these past few weeks, regarding change and the work of the Holy Spirit.

This particular vision came to Ezekiel while he, along with the entire upper class of Jewish society, were being held in captivity in Babylon. Remember, the destruction of Jerusalem, and the Babylonian captivity, was the result of the people turning away from God, and it lasted almost 60 years. We had an interesting discussion about the timing of this prophesy, at Bible study, and after a bit more study and research, I found that Ezekiel had this vision about five years into the time of captivity, and he would have been sharing it with folks for whom the destruction of the Temple, and their beloved city, was still very fresh in their minds.

So, good ol’ Zeek has this vision, or dream and not just any vision, or dream, but one that’s, frankly, macabre and bizarre. In this vision, God takes him to a valley filled with dry bones and asks him if these bones can live. Ezekiel, being the prophet that he was, knows the answer to that question,” Lord, God you know.” It seems almost as if God was testing Ezekiel because even though Ezekiel believed in resurrection, as the majority of the Jewish people did, that was something meant to happen far down the road, not at that particular moment.

What God does next, is interesting. Instead of simply causing flesh and breath to come into these dry bones, God walks Ezekiel through a set of prophesies designed to accomplish the job.

First, God tells Ezekiel to prophecy to the bones, and when Ezekiel follows God’s command, the bones are joined, sinew and flesh and skin appear. What we have, at this point, is a bunch bodies without any life in them. I’ve heard this text referred to as the zombie text, and I have to say that this description of what Ezekiel witnessed, isn’t wrong. But what was missing was the breath. So, God tells Ezekiel to prophecy to the breath, and verse 9 tells us what happens next: ***9****Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath:[c] Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath,[d] and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”*

Ezekiel does as he’s commanded and verse 10 tells us that the breath came into them and they lived and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

But God isn’t done yet. Ezekiel records the following in verses 11 and 12,***11****Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’* ***12****Therefore prophesy and say to them: Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O my people, and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.*

God could have just as easily let Ezekiel observe the process, but I suspect that God chose this method to drive home the point that resurrection, in this particular context, could only be be achieved in a partnership with God. If you look at the entire passage in context, it’s clear that this vision, this dream, was God’s way of letting the people of Israel know that their captivity wasn’t a permanent condition, but some work on the part of the House of Israel was required.

Since this is obviously a case of God dealing with a specific situation, how do we relate this passage to our lives 2,400 years later? I believe that the second half of verse 11, holds the key.

“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.”

I believe this portion of the reading refers to a type of spiritual death. So, what happens when our own spiritual practices become dry? What happens when our relationship with the divine becomes rote and ceases to bring joy? What happens when what we do here on Sunday morning becomes just another obligation; something we do just because that’s what society, or our family, or our circle of friends expect of us? What happens when we’re just going through the motions? Is this a sign that we’re experiencing spiritual death? And what can we do when our bones are dried up and our hope is lost and we feel cut off from God? I’ll admit, there are times when I find myself struggling with this same issue.

Sometimes, the phrase “fake it, till you make it,” can get us through these rough patches, but other times it can be difficult to even fake the hope and the joy we should be experiencing though a connection with God. So, what can we do when we find ourselves dying spiritually?

Traditionally, Lent involves giving something up; a habit, a favorite food or activity, a particular vice. But what if we were to add something instead of subtracting something? What I’ve done, this year, doesn’t involve giving up Mac and Cheese or chocolate, (like that would ever happen). Instead I chose to add something to my morning routine. I’m an early riser, as those of you who have been on the receiving end of a 3 AM email from me can attest. Normally, my routine involves coffee, watching the morning news, playing games on my phone and spending time with the cats, and yes, the occasional 3 AM email.

This year, I decided that I needed to be more deliberate about spending time with God in the morning. So, I added time in my routine for prayer and meditation. Now, you’d think, that as a Pastor, I’d be doing this anyway, but I’ll confess that up to now, it’s often been hit or miss. I’ll tell you, though, taking the time to deliberately connect with the divine has breathed new life into my call as your pastor, it’s made an enormous difference in my day to day life, and in my ministry. It’s something that I plan on continuing well past this Lenten season.

Here’s the thing, if you find yourself in that situation where faith and practice have become rote, know that you’re not alone. God stands ready to partner with you in your own resurrection. How that happens will look different for each of us. Some may find the sinew and flesh of faith restored by simple activities such as gardening, or hiking, or reading, or attending Bible study. Some may find a renewed hope through prayer and meditation. Whatever works for you, remember this: the restoration of hope; the renewal of faith, starts with being open to letting God breathe the breath of life into you. My favorite, and most uttered prayer, is “God, thank you, thank you, help me, help me.” For me, that’s often enough to allow the wind of the spirit to begin the reversal of my dry bones’ moments.

I love the promise that God makes in the first half of verse 14, after the very bones have cried out, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live.” I can personally attest to the fact that this is a promise that God stands ready, willing and able to keep for each and every one of us, if we’re willing to open ourselves up to accepting it.

When hope is gone; when bones are dry, be open to new ways to experience the life-giving breath of the Spirit in your life. Partner with God in your spiritual resurrection, in whatever way works for you. Do this and, trust me, God *will* open the grave of your spiritual death and you shall live. AMEN