

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 8:6-11

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year A
Midway Presbyterian Church
March 25, 2023

Ezekiel and the Valley of Dry Bones

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

A major event took place between last Sunday's Lectionary Old Testament Lesson from 1 Samuel and the one from Ezekiel today. The 1 Samuel lesson spoke of the anointing of David, which introduced the period of the monarchy, and today the prophet Ezekiel announces the revival of Israel. But what occurred between these two was defeat. Listen to these words from Ezekiel 37:1-14...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson today the Apostle Paul contrasts life in the flesh with life in the spirit, for "to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." Listen to these words from Romans 8:6-11...

Sermon

The loss by Israel's military and subsequent exile had been anticipated in prophetic announcements as early as the eighth century B.C. These developments were seen as judgment upon the sinful people. First, in about 722, the Northern Kingdom was defeated by the Assyrians and the population dispersed throughout the empire. Then in 597 the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, captured Judah, destroyed Jerusalem with its temple, and carried off the people to Babylon.

The prophet Ezekiel was likely one of the leading figures in Jerusalem, for he was taken with this first wave of captives. We could hardly exaggerate the seriousness of the Exile, or Diaspora, as

a national disaster and a crisis of faith. For the Judeans had lost the land promised to Abraham and his ancestors—land that was granted during the time of Joshua. Zedekiah, the last of the Davidic kings, was a captive, first in prison and then at the court of the Babylonian monarch. The temple, where the Lord made his name to dwell, and where his glory was known—the temple lay in ruins. The holy city was plundered, their leaders maimed and put in chains, their soldiers put to the sword, their young men and women either killed or dragged into a foreign land. Is it any wonder then that the people asked if the history of God with the people of Israel had come to an end? Was that relationship gone with the wind?

They ask the poignant question with which the Book of Lamentations ends:

[Have] you have utterly rejected us, and are angry with us beyond measure? (5:22)

Ezekiel had tried to warn the people. We read about it in the earlier chapters of this prophetic book. He tried to tell them they needed to repent. He tried to tell them they were going to go into exile. But his message was received like that of the boy who cried wolf. He tried dramatic presentation—lying on his left side for three hundred and ninety days to show how many years Israel would be captive. He tried cutting off his hair. He dug a hole in the wall of his mud-bricked dwelling and pulled himself through with his traveling bag. The people applauded this dramatic performance—“My, what a good sermon today, Pastor.” But they didn’t heed the message. Ezekiel had visions during thunderstorms. He ate papyrus scrolls covered with words of mourning and sorrow. He did not try to make bad news sound like good news.

But the people were so blind they would not see. They had gotten so used to ignoring the truth that they couldn’t hear it. And then the unthinkable did happen. Jerusalem fell to Babylon. Some died. Some escaped. Some were taken prisoners-of-war. And Ezekiel was among those taken.

And that's when the prophet became the pastor—pastor to a congregation in exile. A congregation desperately needing a word of hope. Before, Ezekiel's call was to repent. Now, his task was to pry open closed hearts long enough to receive God's healing Word. For they were saying,

“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” (37:11b)

In short: “We are as good as dead.” It was then that God gave Ezekiel the vision that we have recorded in Chapter 37. A vision of a valley with “very many dry bones.” It was at first a place where a battle had occurred, a killing field, with the shadow of death. Then it was a cemetery of unburied skeletons. Dry bones indicate that life once there is no more. Dry bones have a past but no future. Dry bones mean that death took place a long time ago.

We may picture this Valley of Dry Bones as a battlefield where ineffectual resistance had been offered up against invading Babylon, and the people's hope had been dashed. The scene brings home to the prophet the desperate situation of his people. In the ancient world bones counted for more than they do to us today. If the bones were strong—the soul was strong. Dry bones equal the dry soul of the people of Israel.

Then God asks Ezekiel a question, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And Ezekiel does not respond by putting on a happy face or looking on the bright side. Ezekiel answers God's question of “Can these bones live?” with, “I don't know. I don't know. Only you know, God.”

I read of a veteran who began experiencing the after-tremors of his war experience, in what is now called post-traumatic stress syndrome. Nightmares accompanied his sleep. Day anxieties left him in cold sweats. At the VA hospital he was placed in therapy. But he also sought the help of pastors. He went from one to the next, saying, “Pastor, I killed twenty-four people in Vietnam. I can't sleep at night remembering that I am a murderer, a killer. What can I do? How can I get over this? I don't know what to do.”

One pastor told him to just put it out of his mind and think on other things, because what is past is past and there is no use dwelling on history and things you can't change. "Concentrate on the present and on your life that was spared." Another pastor told him not to feel guilty because he was only following orders, and he could not be held accountable for his actions. "You are forgiven completely," said the pastor.

A third pastor listened to the anguish of the young man. Sitting in silence, the pastor heard the soldier's story of his killings. When the veteran asked his question, "What can I do? How can I get over this?" the pastor continued to sit in silence. Then she put her head in her hands and wept, shaking her head back and forth and saying, "I don't know. I don't know." And the veteran soldier joined the weeping pastor, and together they wept for a world that was much too full of pain for one person's tears.

My friends, the Easter Resurrection came to people who were shaking their hands and saying, "We don't know. We don't know if we'll ever see our Lord again." It came to people who were weeping. To people who had given up hope, considering what they had seen during Holy Week. Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried.

You and I live in a country that is drowning in debt, drugs, and immorality. Presidents publicly use profanity. And there is little sign of repentance. The apostle Paul said in his letter to the Romans:

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. (8:6)

In our churches there are members who rarely come to worship and members who give nothing to support the work of the church. What would an analysis of the spiritual bones of some church members indicate this fifth Sunday of Lent? Would it show a diet low in worship, Bible

study, witness and service; low in prayer, fasting, and giving alms? Do we long and pray for the gifts of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? What would be the answer if the Lord spoke directly and asked, “Can these bones live?”

As we consider this 37th chapter of Ezekiel, maybe we are reminded of a situation we have faced in the past or perhaps in our lives today. Who has not stood by the grave of his hopes? Faced conditions so desolate, so impossible that we knew the depths of despair? Things have gone down one path for so long that we think that there is no chance of renewal. It may be that a relationship has become so parched and bitter that no matter how vital it may have been at one time, we are convinced that there is no way out, or that revival is impossible. It may be a habit. A temptation. A sickness. A sorrow.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” I don’t know...I don’t know. “O Lord, God, you know.” And what God knows is that “Yes, they can—by the Word of God.” To be sure, some things have to first die, in order that new life can spring forth. Some things have to end, in order for the new to begin. But Israel did rise from the grave of defeat and exile. Hope returned. The nation did stand on its own feet again. A closer unity was formed—by the Word of God.

No, human beings are not able in and of themselves to solve every problem that results from sin and alienation. The dry bones in Ezekiel 37 cannot find new flesh for themselves by themselves; they cannot even cry out to God for help. Only God can send the Spirit, breathe life into dry bones, raise the dead.

The Psalmist said:

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
 from where will my help come?
 My help comes from the Lord,
 who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:1-2)

The source of hope and healing is the God of Israel, the God who created the world and all that is in it, who brought a people to birth from a childless old couple named Abraham and Sarai; who freed their descendants from slavery in mighty Egypt, and entered into covenant with them; who raised up judges and kings and prophets; and in the fulness of time, sent his only Son to be the Savior of all who would receive him.

With Simon Peter we ask,

Lord, to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life. (John 6:68)

Ezekiel's vision became good news to a people who considered themselves as good as dead. It is the good news that people can come back to life, by the Word and the Spirit of God. It is good news to people who have been beaten down by their own sins or are suffering under the weight of the sins of others. To all these and more, God can and does give new life.

“I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” (Ezekiel 37:14a)

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.