

Can These Bones Live? Ez. 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-4, 43-47 9/19/21

Last Sunday we talked about some of the challenges facing us and other churches in light of the ongoing pandemic. For example, we now have much lower worship attendance and participation in groups for adults, youth, and children among other things. We looked at a story from the book of Ezra about the return of the Israelites to Jerusalem 50 years after they were taken into captivity in Babylon. At the laying of the foundation of the new temple, people rejoiced in this major step forward, but some, especially the older people who remembered the grand, former temple, wept, knowing that things would never be the way they were before. We noted that people today are reacting in the same ways as we as a church face an uncertain future, but a future that will certainly be different from the way things were in the past.

This morning, we continue to think about the challenges facing us as a church, and again we'll look back to the time of the Babylonian captivity, 5-6 centuries before Jesus came into the world. This time we'll look at another critical factor in restoring the Israelite community, a factor which is crucial to restoring our own community.

Our story comes from the book of Ezekiel. Now Ezekiel was a priest in Jerusalem prior to its fall to the Babylonians. He warned God's people that they needed to repent, or that they would face judgment, but they

wouldn't listen, and God allowed this awful defeat to befall them. Ezekiel was taken to Babylon along with the first wave of captives. While there, he noted that God's people were in despair, wondering if God had permanently abandoned them. God used him to bring hope to the people during this time, often by giving him dreams and visions, some of which are very strange! One of the most famous of these visions is found in Ezek.

37. We'll begin in verse 1. *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. <sup>2</sup>He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know.'<sup>4</sup>Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup>Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>I will lay sinews on 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.'* (Ez. 37:1-6)

A valley filled with dry bones. Bleached in the Mediterranean sun. The remains of an Israelite army decimated by the Babylonians. God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" That reminds me of the time my son, Stephen, was about three years-old and was watching a Mr. Rogers episode. Mr. Rogers' fish had died and he used it as an opportunity to

teach the children about death. He put his fish in a matchbox, took it out in the yard, and buried it in the flower garden. When he came back inside, he said “My fish is dead. Will it come back to life again?” My son nodded his head “yes” in answer to the question. “No,” said Mr. Rogers. My fish is dead. It won’t live again.”

And that was the obvious answer to God’s question to Ezekiel, “*Will these bones live again?*” “Of course not! They’ve been dead for a long time. Dead is dead! No, they won’t live again.” But Ezekiel knows God well enough to frame a more diplomatic answer. “*O Lord God, you know.*” Ezekiel knows that even natural law is uncertain where God gets involved.

The story continues. *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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. (Ez. 37:7-10)*

That was unexpected! It seems like a scene from “Game of Thrones” or something ! Ezekiel does what he has been commanded to do,

speaking God's word to the bones, and they come together in proper order and God covers them with sinews and flesh. You may remember the spiritual "Dem Bones" spelling out the connections- "The toe bone connected to the foot bone, the foot bone connected to the heel bone, the heel bone connected to the ankle bone... Now hear the word of the Lord!" But there is more. There is no life in these zombie-like bodies until the breath or Spirit of God enters them, and only then do they live! So what does all of this mean? Verse 11.

*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." <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup>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.'* (Ez. 37:11-14)

God is giving hope to his people who have lost everything and are living in pagan Babylon, serving the king there. God has not forsaken his people, but will restore their nation in God's time. And God did exactly that

when the Persians defeated the Babylonians, as we read last week, and King Cyrus sent them home to rebuild Jerusalem.

I think this passage speaks directly to us and to churches all around our country today. We're hurting. Many churches are closing and others are likely to close soon. And keep in mind that our problems did not begin with the pandemic. Church attendance across denominational lines has been declining for decades and the average age of church members has been on the rise. The pandemic just hastened these trends. Given these facts, it's easy to lose hope!

But remember this: The church is not just a human institution. The church is God's plan for this time, the Body of Christ. And Jesus told us that the gates of hell will not prevail against it! (Matt. 16:18) The Romans tried to stamp it out and failed. The Communists tried to stamp it out in Russia and China and in many other countries and failed. Many governments are trying to extinguish it today in places like Saudi Arabia and North Korea, but they will fail, for the church is God's project and God will not be thwarted.

But that doesn't mean that we're not in for some tough times. This is not new, even here in the USA, where church participation has been low before. In fact it was very low during colonial times- much lower

than today. Most people just weren't interested in going to church. And popular intellectuals like Jefferson and Franklin rejected key elements of Christian teaching. I'm sure many Christians were not very hopeful about the future of the church, but then something unexpected happened. The Spirit of God began to move during two revival movements called the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Great Awakenings, and huge numbers of people came to faith and revitalized churches throughout North America. Similar movements happened in Europe and they are happening today in parts of Africa and Asia.

In some ways it mirrored what took place at Pentecost, when God's Spirit swept through people in Jerusalem following Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Like Ezekiel, the apostles proclaimed God's Word, and when the time was right, the Spirit came and fell on them and those to whom they were speaking. The church was born and became a vital fellowship bringing hope and healing to everyone they encountered.

So, as we look at churches today in the US, and at GPC in particular, we may wonder, "Can these bones live again?" Compared to what was going on in the 1950's and 60's, our churches may appear to be dead! The fact that we have so few adult baptisms in most churches tells us that very few people are coming to faith through our ministries. Is there any hope? As long as God chooses to continue working through churches, we can

indeed live again. We have a role to play, just as Ezekiel did- to proclaim God's Word to one another and to the world around us. And we can and should make use of new technologies and strategies to do that. But until the Spirit of God begins to move, we won't make much progress.

So, while we're reflecting and strategizing, it is also critically important to be praying for the Spirit of God to come and work in and through us. To pray for renewal, for revival, for resurrection. As theologian N.T. Wright puts it, "We are not to be surprised if living as Christians brings us to the place where we find we are at the end of our own resources, and that we are called to rely on the God who raises the dead."

When I lived in Daytona Beach, I enjoyed riding the waves on my Boogie board. I got pretty good at it. And I learned a couple things. First, you have no control over the waves. Some days they are great for riding and some days they are not. You can't control that. If the waves are bad, you just can't catch them. Second, if you just stand there, or lie on your board, you won't ride any waves. They will just wash over or under you. If you watch people at the beach learning to catch waves, you'll see that happen a lot. If you want to ride a wave successfully, you have to push yourself forward at just the right moment. Then you can sync up with the movement of the wave, relying on its power to carry you along.

I think the Holy Spirit is a lot like a wave. We can't control it, but we can't just do nothing either. We begin by discerning the movement of the Spirit in our church and community, whatever that movement may be. Then we sync our actions to the movement of the Spirit and go for the ride! Sometimes it doesn't go well. Maybe we get slammed into the sand! Or, maybe what we thought was a great wave turns out to be something else. But other times, it all works together for a great ride which furthers God's kingdom in a particular place.

So, I challenge all of us to pray, to watch and see where God's Spirit is moving, and to step up and say, "Here I am. Use me." Can these bones live? Lord God, you know.