

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobnier, Illinois
Lent 5A
March 29, 2020
Ezekiel 37:1-14 and John 11:17-27, 38-53

Life for Dry Bones

And he said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" And I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." (Ezekiel 37:3 ESV)

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Do you ever feel like those dry, lifeless bones that Ezekiel saw in the valley? Are you worn down by pain, suffering, or affliction? Do you suffer from depression, worry, anxiety, or hopelessness? Have you suffered a recent loss? Are you beset by a multitude of disappointments? Or do you, like Ezekiel, see nothing but dry bones all around? You're beset by the constant barrage of news and reports about coronavirus and the unending call for precautions to be taken. You start to feel the effects of isolation it has brought about. You see the moral decay all around. With all that's going on, perhaps you too ask at times, "Can these bones live?"

What Ezekiel saw in the valley certainly didn't look like it. It looked like a valley of death. Yet, at God's command and by the power of God's Word those bones did live. They came together and were reconnected, each to its proper body. They were covered with tendons and ligaments and skin. And when Ezekiel instructed the breath to enter them, it did, and they became alive, an exceedingly great army. The powerful Word of God did what it said. Those dry bones came to life.

And it was every bit the miracle it sounds like. For God still claimed the Israelites as His own, despite their having turned aside to worship false gods. Indeed, it was their unfaithfulness which had landed them in Babylon in the first place. Because of their rebellion, Jerusalem and the temple had been destroyed. They had lost everything – their identity and their God. They were completely "cut off." Things couldn't have been any worse. Everything seemed hopeless.

Mary and Martha knew that feeling. Their brother Lazarus had become ill, and eventually died. When Jesus finally arrived, they each said to Him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died." You can hear their pain as they seem to blame Jesus for not coming sooner and preventing this death. You can hear their hopelessness. Indeed, their brother had been in the grave four days. His body had surely started to decay.

Now both the valley of the dry bones and the tomb of Lazarus show us the reality of death. They both show us the result of sin. They both show us the utter impossibility of saving ourselves from death's grip. And they both show us that the answer to the question "Can these bones live?" is a resounding "Yes!"

You bet they can! But not necessarily in the way that we think. When God restored life to Israel it wasn't as immediate as they might have wanted or hoped. They certainly didn't deserve such a promise. They were nothing but dried-up, hopeless people. Still, they were God's people. God still claimed them as His own even though they had turned against Him. God still claimed them as His own even though He had to punish them. God still claimed them as His own in spite of their being dry bones in the valley of Babylon. God remains true to His promises and is rich in mercy.

So when Ezekiel indicates that only God knows if the dry bones could live, He proclaims that God alone is able to accomplish such a thing, if it would happen at all. And it was through the power of His Word that the dry bones came to life. "Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." God's Word is a creating word as we read in Genesis 1 and 2. And God's Word is also a re-creating Word as we see here. As God created Adam from dust, so He is able to recreate Israel, which had been reduced to dust and hopelessness.

Again, as we read of Lazarus, we see the life-giving power of God's Word. When Jesus said, "Lazarus, come forth!", Lazarus came forth. The power of Jesus' Word gave life.

And His Word continues to give life as it works through His Spirit, with a capital "S". Indeed, it is only through the Holy Spirit that true life is created, recreated, and sustained. And why did God give life to dry bones? Because He wanted the people to know that they were His people and that He was their God. Why did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? It was so people would believe in Him and receive the life He came to give them. He wanted everyone to know that He is "the resurrection and the life."

And that's the same reason he gives life to our dry bones. He made us His people. We didn't choose Him, He chose us. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." (1 Peter 2:9-10). And He did all this even though we do not deserve it. He did it even though we are dried-up, hopeless, and "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). Indeed, God comes to us in His grace and gives us life through His Word and Spirit.

For God's own Son is God's Word made flesh, who came to suffer and die on our behalf. He was the one forsaken by God. He was the one who fulfilled the psalmist's lament, "My bones are out of joint" and "I can count all my bones" (Psalm 22:14, 17). And Jesus didn't do His saving work in a valley where only the prophet's eyes could see, but on a hill where all eyes could see. Jesus became the dry bones that we deserve to be.

Yet, Jesus is God's Word of life. As He rose from the dead, so we, buried with Him in Baptism, will also rise to new life through His Spirit. "'The first man Adam became a living being.' The last Adam became a life-giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). The sins we committed in the past, the sin and

guilt we struggle with every day, need not lead us to despair. We have been made alive in and through Christ. Our dry bones live!

The Spirit of Christ, who brings new life, lives within us and continues to give us life. "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you." (Rom. 8:11). This is God's promise to you. As is this, "Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again." (2 Cor. 1:9-10). No matter the circumstances, there is always hope, even now. No matter how deep the valley, no matter how dried-up we may feel, God's Spirit gives us life and comfort. During Lent He points us ahead through the cross to Jesus' resurrection. Every day He points us ahead to the certainty of our own resurrection. There is always hope! Dry bones can live!

When God asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" the prophet said, "O Lord God, you know." It surely didn't seem like those dead, dried-up, scattered bones could live. But they did! It certainly didn't seem to Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus would live again. But he did! God brought and continues to bring new life and hope to His people, Israel. He continues to give life to His Church. Time after time as we gather here, God brings new life and hope to you and me through the Spirit of Christ. Nothing can take away that hope. Dry bones can live! Thanks be to God! Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.