

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Pentecost B
May 19, 2024
Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

The Lord and Giver of Life

[Jesus said to His disciples,] “[I]t is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7 ESV)

In the name of Jesus, the only Savior of the world,

Jesus told His disciples that, after His ascension, He would send them the Holy Spirit. And He did. That’s what we hear in the Second Reading for today from Acts chapter 2. Fifty days after He had risen from the dead, ten days after His ascension, Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit upon His apostles, and the Spirit went to work “convict[ing] the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment,” (John 16:8). Yet, what happened that day was foreshadowed in Ezekiel’s day.

Ezekiel is set in the midst of a horrific scene: a valley full of bones, very dry bones. The bones picked clean. It was a scene of death. Death as far as the eye could see. Indeed, that’s the spiritual condition of Israel in the Old Testament lesson today. Their bones were dry. They were in exile in Babylon. The people thought that there was no hope. God had abandoned them. Now they must die away from the Promised Land. They lay slain, their spirits exhausted. Was there any hope for them?

Now, it’s important to take note of why Israel lay slain, their bones dried out in spiritual hopelessness in Babylon. They had abandoned God, of course. They had consistently broken His commandments. Murder, adultery, theft, and the worship of idols were rampant in Israel in the last days of David’s kingdom. The people thought that God would not see, but He did see. So God abandoned them to their sins, and would not rescue them.

To add to their spiritual dryness, God pointedly condemned them through His prophets. Ezekiel preached to the people in exile after 600 B.C., but 50 years before, Hosea, brought God’s Word. God used him to slay the people spiritually. He also reminded them that God used all the prophets that way when the people sinned. “O Ephraim, what shall I do to you? O Judah, what shall I do to you? For your faithfulness is like a morning cloud, and like the early dew it goes away. Therefore I

have hewn them by the prophets, I have slain them by the words of My mouth...For I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of the God more than burnt offerings." (Hosea 6:4-6).

Even as people lay spiritually dry and dead, though, God gave to Ezekiel the means to bring the people back to spiritual life. It was the very Word of God that had slain them. Is it possible that what God used to slay the people could also give them life again? Absolutely! Faithful Hannah, Samuel's mother knew this. In her prayer, she prayed, "The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up." (1 Sam. 2:6). The Lord asked Ezekiel if the bones of the slain of Israel could live again. Ezekiel, trusting in God, said, "O Lord God, You know." Then the very first words that God commanded Ezekiel to speak were, "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!" Ezekiel did not inquire into how they felt. He did not ask them what they enjoyed in life. He did not ask them what they would like to accomplish in their lives. He got right to the most vital matter, and it was not anything that was in the people. They could bring no life to themselves, nor conjure up any spiritual remedy. No, they had to hear the Word of the Lord.

Hear the Word of the Lord! O precious Word of God! Oh, that all people would pause and hear the Word of the Lord. It kills, to be sure, but it also makes alive again. It is the killing thunder of the Law, but it is especially the sweet comfort of forgiveness, the Gospel, the means of grace. By the Word of God, the Holy Spirit comes and brings new spiritual life. The Word brings the news of God's mercy. He will not stay angry forever, but will have mercy on those who turn back to Him.

That mercy came to the people Israel. As they lay spiritually dry and hopeless in Babylon, they repented of their sins and waited for help. God spoke through Ezekiel and said, "I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and done it." God did perform it. Salvation comes through Him alone. He brought them back to their land.

For another example of a people spiritually dead and dry after being slain by the Word of God, consider the people to whom Peter preached on Pentecost. After Peter told them that they had killed their Lord and Christ, who was now risen from the dead, we're told, "Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

What sudden spiritual dryness they suffered! The condemning words of Peter did their work and slew them on the spot. Now what was to be done with these slain,

who suddenly realized their spiritual condition? Just as swiftly as they had been slain, Peter brought the springs of living water to them by the forgiveness of their sins. Where true repentance is found, there the Gospel must be preached in all of its sweetness. Peter simply announced to them the Gospel that comes with baptism by water: "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (Acts 2:38).

Ezekiel foresaw this very time of the apostles. He prophesied the Lord's words thus in chapter 36 of his book: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes..." (Ezek. 36:25-27). The forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ, our crucified, resurrected, and ascended Savior, brings this spiritual life to people. When a person trusts in Jesus Christ for forgiveness, he really lives before God, not only spiritually now, but he will live before Him forever at the resurrection of the dead.

Age after age, spiritually dry and dead people are brought to spiritual life by the Word of the Lord. The Valley of Dry Bones exists even today. We have to look no farther than our own streets and avenues for that valley. There we find dry bones, people who have no power to bring life to themselves. But having been convicted by the Word of God, they can be given new life by the very same Word of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus brings forgiveness. He brings eternal life. Hear the Word of the Lord! Is it really possible that dead bones would live again? We all know people who are spiritually dead, and about whom we would say, "No way! They're too far gone. They can never live." Yet, a better response is Ezekiel's, "Lord, you know." The Lord knows that His Word kills, but also brings life. It is beyond our own abilities to bring people from spiritual death to spiritual life. But the Word of God can and does make people alive.

Spiritual dryness is not always a sudden condition. We ourselves who are alive in the spirit sometimes feel our spirits drying out. We may face a time of trouble in our lives and believe that God doesn't care. Perhaps there is a secret sin that consumes you, and you feel your devotion toward God waning. Maybe you have been away from the Lord's house for a long time and feel as though no one will accept you again. At times like these we must remember that God is merciful, and absolutely forgives the sins of repentant sinners on account of the sacrifice of His Son.

Like the people to whom Peter spoke, like the dry bones to whom Ezekiel prophesied, spiritually dry people today must also hear the Word of the Lord. He

knows our desperate condition. He asks for nothing on our part. We cannot earn our comfort, or His grace. He gives this to us freely in Jesus Christ. In baptism He says, "Your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake." In the Lord's Supper, Jesus says, "Your sins are forgiven through my body and blood, given and shed for you." Hear the Word of the Lord! Forgiveness is yours. Everything that comes with forgiveness is also ours: peace with God, peace within ourselves, peace among ourselves, and eternal peace, because we know that we shall rise at the resurrection to eternal life. Amen.

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

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