

Can These Bones Live?
Ezekiel 37:1-14; John 11:1-42

The year was 587 BCE, **Before Christian Era, Before Comma Era**. It was the bottom in the history of the Old Testament nation, the lowest point in Israel's history. Their nation had become like a desert floor covered with dead skeletons in Death Valley. It was like the Civil War and the battle of Gettysburg, with dead bodies in the fields by the thousands. It was the worst time in their nation's history. The whole desert, as far as the eye could see, was filled with white bones of dead young men. The Babylonians had wiped out the total Israelite army. It was no contest. The Babylonians were the strongest nation around. Babylonia was a great big nation; Israel was a small nation. In 587 BCE, all their young Israelite warriors were killed. Their bodies were sprawled out on the desert sands as far as the eye could see in all directions. Those bodies were not buried but just laid there in the sun.

The temple was destroyed. The capital city was destroyed. The people were in total poverty. Everybody was hungry or on the edge of starvation. The Book of Lamentations says, "All the people grown as they search for food but no one gives them anything. The hands of compassionate mothers have boiled their children. They become their food in the destruction of the daughters of the people."

And the Israelite people who were alive were taken as prisoners, chains around their necks, dragged back to Babylonia. The Jewish nation had become like the dead skeletons strewn across the desert floor in Death Valley.

The Jews began lamenting to themselves, "God can't help us. God won't help us. There is no God. God is punishing us for our sins. We are here to rot and die in the desert. We have become like dry bones." There was one person left. His name was Ezekiel. The Bible tells us that the Lord took Ezekiel out into death valley, and the Lord looked around the desert floor and the Lord asked Ezekiel: "Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel wisely replied, "Lord, God, you know." The Lord responded, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord."

I have asked similar questions of God. Can these bones, the bones of FPCT, live? Repeatedly I have heard God respond, "Prophesy Mortal, and say to the bones, 'Hear the word of the Lord.'"

What in our community, in our congregation, in your home, has seemed as dead as the dry bones covering the desert floor?

To quote theologian Charles Spurgeon, "Now, first, in using this text from Ezekiel, as I have said, for practical purposes, I am going to make this remark upon it: **WE ARE NOTHING WITHOUT THE HOLY SPIRIT.**" Without the Holy Spirit, we are nothing. Put another way, we are but a pile of dried up bones without the Spirit of God giving us life and breath. That scares some people. Just the thought that the Holy Spirit can and does enter our bodies, bringing life and fire into our lives can be scary....unless, that is, you fully trust in God.

Verse 14 clearly states that the source of the life that is bringing Israel back from the dead is the spirit of the Lord. When all life appears to have gone, the word of God is the means whereby God's spirit revives and restores. It is only through the power of the Holy Spirit that we are able to have new life. The very nature of God is to give new life, to restore life, and to resurrect from the despair of the world, making new and life-giving, transformed creations. Remember the Trinity? God the Father, Creator of all that is; Jesus Christ, his Son, who redeems us today and everyday; and the Spirit, that sustains us as we move through life. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer – the Three-in-One. The Sustainer makes us whole, keeps us, and empowers us. The Spirit of God causes a fire to burn within us that will not be put out.

I think any congregation can thrive if they become a place where people can sense God's renewing Spirit at work.

Last night one of the songs Dorothy Klass sang had a line that really caught my attention: "Feel the Spirit, in this very room, making us new by the love of the Lord." Last night we were worshipping God. And in that worship, we practiced one of the basics of cultivating the Spirit. This happens by simply cultivating the Spirit's presence through the practices that have characterized Christian discipleship throughout the centuries: prayer, study of scripture, service, fellowship and worship. These five practices proclaim the word of the Lord. Through prayer, through study, fellowship, worship and serving others, the word of God is proclaimed. And then – the promise of God, "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 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."

There it is, the promise of God, "If you...then I..." If you prophecy to the bones, and say, "Hear the words of the Lord' then I will bring the dry bones together, put skin and sinews upon them, and breathe breath into them and they will live." Hope is not lost. Though in the valley of despair or death, God will not leave us for dead but will make us new, giving new life. This people who would have been feeling deserted by God, with no hope for the future, are being reassured that God has the power to resurrect them.

As we have journeyed through this period of Lent, we have come full circle. Ash Wednesday we were reminded, "You are dust. From dust you came, and to dust you shall return." Now we know what the Lord can do with a pile of bones and dust – we can live – not just exist, not simply survive – but be part of the Lord's vast multitude.

Today, I would like to suggest to you a basic thesis: that the very essence of God is to take that which is dead and make it alive again. There is so much pessimism, so much cynicism, so much disbelief that God cannot take that which is dead and make it alive. Today, there is so much pessimism that God cannot make our lives new, that God is no longer in the business of transforming and making new. However, I would urge you to remember many of the biblical examples of God's Spirit renewing, recreating, and giving new life.

In the passage from John, Lazarus is raised from the dead and gets a second chance opportunity to serve God. The man born blind received new life when his sight was restored. The Samaritan woman at the well received new life when she heard the word of the Lord and the news of Living Water was made known to her. I would encourage you to remember that a surely as Good Friday comes, the Day of Resurrection follows close behind. I would urge you to open yourself to the life-giving, life-restoring, resurrecting Spirit of God.

Today I invite you to open your blinded eyes, open your hardened hearts, hear the word of the Lord. "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. Receive the Holy Spirit and be made new.