

“Now Hear the Word of the Lord”
Ezekiel 37:1-14

Have you ever knowingly liked a portion of Scripture for the wrong reason? Have you ever been fond of a certain Biblical saying or story, all the while knowing that you have made no real attempt to hear what the Lord might be saying to you through that portion of his Word?

I think many people would have to confess to having that sort of an attitude toward the account of Ezekiel’s experience in the Valley of the Dry Bones. Let’s face it. There are good students of the Word who can easily recall 6 or 8 verses of 1 Corinthians 13, can rattle off a psalm or two without pausing for thought, and can quote all 20 verses of Luke’s version of the Christmas story, but who, when confronted with our Old Testament lesson, can do little more than cheerfully offer, “The toe-bone’s connected to the foot-bone.”

What Ezekiel saw and heard in that valley 2600 years ago was so dramatic, and has inflamed human imagination so intensely, that today people who know nothing else from the more than 1200 verses of Ezekiel’s prophecies have a mental image of those dry bones. In other words, even those who do not know the prophecy know of the prophecy. Ezekiel was a prophet during the Babylonian Captivity, the Exile, sent to declare God’s messages to a dispersed, displaced, disheartened people. The hopes of these Israelites focused on far-off Jerusalem, which was the Washington, D.C., the New York, St. Louis, Las Vegas, and Cambridge of the Jewish people. It was the center and the symbol of their way of life and of their heritage, as well as the only place on earth where true sacrifices could be offered to the true God. Jerusalem, the city where the palace and the Temple stood together, was the symbol of the Israelites’ political hopes and religious superiority, the city where God reigned through his chosen people. Yet the captives knew that the palace and the Temple no longer stood side by side; in fact, neither of them stood at all. The palace had been burned; the Temple had been leveled. All but the poor had been deported from the city. Hope lay among the ashes of the city whose name meant “Foundation of Peace.”

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None of this should have come as a surprise. For years God had been sending prophets to warn the people to repent of their godless arrogance, to see their smugness as sin and their unfaithfulness as filth. Prophet after prophet had foretold that both the city and the nation would be forfeited, and that God would start afresh with the faithful remnant who still put their trust in the promises of God. But most of the people had no use for this message.

Their trust was in the status quo or in the hope that one day a leader would defeat all the evil nations and convert them to their own form of government, which anyone could see must be blessed by God.

Well, God's prophecies for Jerusalem were fulfilled. The invasion came, just as God had said it would, and God sent Ezekiel to the Exiles, so that he could continue to explain what was happening, why it had to happen, and how God still intended to keep his promise and deliver his people.

Now that things were not working according to their rigid expectations, the people were filled with despair. They could have been confident that just as the prophecies of doom had come true, so the prophecies of joyful return and blessings would come true as well. Instead, they sat and cried. "Our hope is gone!" they lamented. "No one can help us now. We are like men who have been slaughtered in battle, wiped out so completely that there isn't even anyone left to bury us."

It's been said that if fear and impatience had a child, that child would be despair. The Israelites were impatient, unwilling to wait for God to fulfill his promises. Their impatience fed a growing fear that perhaps God no longer intended to fulfill his promises, although He had told them, "I, the LORD, have spoken, and I will do it."

At this point Ezekiel appears, fresh from the Valley of the Dry Bones, with a vision aimed at convincing his hearers that their despair really grows out of a refusal to believe the Word of God, the same God who had created them in the first place, who gave them life and formed them into his people by his grace and the power of his Word. God is sending the same message here that he delivers through Ezekiel 65 times in this book: "I, the Lord, shall act, in judgment and in rescue, and then you shall know that I am the Lord."

He tells us the same thing when we fall into despair. "I am still your God. You are still my people."

He tells us the same thing when we fall into despair. "I am still your God. You are still my people. That is the basis for all your hope. Do not sit, timid at the task before you, or immobilized by despair, thinking that all your hope is gone. I am your hope, and I am not gone. I am right here with you."

We cannot ground our hopes, security and trust in what is happening to us or in what we think will soon happen to us. Newscasts constantly remind us that our present circumstances can change in a moment, sweeping aside all our plans. Blessed are you in that day of trouble if your trust is in the Word of the

Lord and your hope is in the promises of God. Blessed are you if your security stems from the blood-soaked wood of the cross and the empty tomb of Christ.

Our hope cannot be in our own goodness, for of ourselves we have no good thing to offer to God, and no power outside of God will save us.

Our hope cannot rest in our wonderful and blessed nation, either, for though we are blessed with wealth and power and glory that are the envy of the rest of the world, we are also surrounded by moral decay, greed, and a worship of self which must create a stench in the nostrils of God. And our ability to point to nations more godless than we are should provide shallow consolation, for Israel at the time of Ezekiel could surely do the same thing. Our hope comes not from who we are, but whose we are, not from what we own but from the One who calls us his own. The comfort Ezekiel was to deliver makes precisely this point. By the grace of God, and at the sacrifice of Christ, we are the people of God. The message Ezekiel was to deliver was only four sentences long, and two of the four sentences begin with the words, "My people."

When despair distorts our outlook so that all around us looks like a valley of dry bones, when all our hopes seem slaughtered and we feel far from God, God asks us, as he asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?"

Can these bones live? Not if they depend on their own power. Not if they are left to themselves. The dead never heal. They cannot get better; they can only get deader. No doctor can restore their health; no human caress can bring them comfort.

Can these bones live? YES, by the power of God! God who creates life and brings it from the grave finds me when I am dead in sins and dismembered by the chaos in which I live, scattered in my rebellion and dried up with hopelessness. By the power and the proclamation of His Word he breathes life into me. He places his Holy Spirit in me, and I live.

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| The story of the dry bones is your story. |
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Ezekiel heard the bones rattling and saw them be given new life in the very valley of death, by the power of the Word of God. They were created anew. The same God who created them gave them new life. You see, the story of the dry bones is your story. God has given you new life by water and the Word.

Through the saving work of Jesus Christ, God has ransomed you from death, rescued you, and invited you to his banquet table. One doesn't set a place at a banquet for the dead. God knows that you are alive: he made you alive, he keeps you alive, and he loves and values you so dearly that he monitors your every breath and listens to the very beating of your heart.

You are a living testimony to the God who loves you and the life he gives you, and you show you are alive in several ways.

- 1) *Dead men tell no tales.* You prove that you are alive in the Spirit by finding ways to tell the story of salvation. Tell the tale of a God who loved you to death, and back to life.
- 2) *No one ever saw a dead man exercise.* Yet daily God gives you opportunity to exercise the spiritual gifts that you have been given.
- 3) *Dead men cannot defend themselves against attacks by the enemy.* But the LORD has equipped you with the shield of faith, the breastplate of righteousness and the rest of the Armor of God, especially the Sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God. Finally,
- 4) *Dead men do not grow, do not drink, and do not eat.* Yet by God's invitation, we grow constantly and are nourished by hearing the Word of the LORD, by feasting at the table he sets before us, and by drinking deeply from the living water of Jesus Christ.

As he promised Israel of old, so the LORD says prophetically to us, "Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I put my Spirit in you, and you live." Now may the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Gregory Mech, pastor

First Good Shepherd Lutheran Church

Las Vegas, NV

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