

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Lent 5 -- March 9th, 2008

Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know."

⁴Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.'" ⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'" ¹⁰So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹²Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.'"

Dear children of God who have been given the breath of life,

How would you like it if you were dragged out of your home against your will? How would you feel if you were separated from your family, if you saw your friends and neighbors killed, if you had to watch as your enemies cursed your God in front of you? How would you like it if you were forced to move to a faraway place where you didn't know the people or their customs or their language? Your first reaction might be anger, or thoughts of revenge might fill your mind. But after a while, after the passing of days and weeks and years, your attitude would probably change. Anger might turn to apathy. Hope might give way to despair. You would eventually come to the conclusion that the only thing to do is make the best of a bad situation because nothing is going to change.

This is not just a sad story. This is a true story. This is Ezekiel's story. His homeland had been invaded. His people were deported. The way Ezekiel saw it, it would be only a matter of time before the Jewish nation was no more. The Lord, however, had other plans. In a strange vision, he gave Ezekiel hope. In a vision of dry bones, he brought a message of hope to a nation living in exile. He promised to rescue his people. He promised to restore his people. But God's message of comfort is not reserved only for Israel. The fulfillment of this vision reaches forward and touches our lives today. Through the prophet Ezekiel, God comes to us and says...

Sermon Theme: Do Not Despair

1. **The Lord is powerful**
2. **The Lord is merciful**

Ezekiel's vision reads more like science fiction than biblical prose. The Lord set the prophet down in the middle of a huge valley. And as he looked around, what did he see? Bones, bones scattered across the valley floor, bones as far as the eye could see. When Ezekiel took a closer look he noticed that these bones were very dry. They were old and brittle, like the remains of a great battle that had been fought in the valley many years before.

That is what Ezekiel saw, but what did his vision mean? And what did these bones represent? The Lord told Ezekiel: **“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” They say, “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off” (11).** The house of Israel was a skeleton of its former self, and nothing was left but a few scattered remains. The people had given up hope. Their strength was sapped. They felt cut off: from their homeland, from their way of life, from their place of worship, and most importantly, from their God. At this particular time in history, the God of Israel didn't look very powerful. But the Lord used this vision to remind Ezekiel that looks can be deceiving. He wanted him to know: “I am still with you. I have not forsaken you. If you want proof, just look at these bones.”

And then something miraculous began to happen. At God's command, the dead bones came to life. They came together and were covered with tendons and flesh and skin. God spoke again, and the breath of life entered these scattered skeletons. And finally these newly formed bodies stood up on their feet and assembled like a huge army. This miraculous transformation was God's way of making a promise to his faithful people. He had not left them for dead. He would not leave them in exile. There was reason for them to have hope for the future. And as he always does, God followed through on this promise. God breathed life into his people. He kept them safe in Babylon. He brought them safely home. His words were not empty promises. His words were filled with power.

The power of God is well documented in the Bible. Without much trouble we could come up with dozens of examples in both the Old and New Testaments. But what about us? What about today? Where is God now? Where can we turn to see his power at work in our lives? In our society sin is not only accepted. It is embraced. In our community, just yesterday a hotel church service became a murder scene. In our own church body we hear about financial challenges and budget shortfalls, but do we really know what that means? It means fewer missions and fewer missionaries. It means that ripe fields will stand idle because there is no one to gather the harvest.

All of this negativity can pile up and weigh us down. All of this bad news can lead even the most devout Christians to wonder whether it is really worthy of it. Is it worth it to trust in a God who seems so distant from us? Is it worth it to follow a God who doesn't always seem to be supporting his own cause? This kind of attitude reveals that there is a problem, but the problem is not with God. The problem lies within us. We would all like to see a more moral world. It would be fantastic if everyone embraced the gospel. It would be wonderful if our churches grew by leaps and bounds.

But when those things don't happen, when we don't see tangible results, it is so easy to point the finger at God. And when the situation appears to be getting worse instead of better, simple trust gives way to sinful doubt. Doubt is a sin, a sin that deserves God's wrath just as much as murder or adultery or stealing or any other sin. And doubt is especially dangerous because it poses a direct threat to our faith. Doubt severs us from the strength we need, the strength that only God can provide. When the situation

looks hopeless, God gives us hope. Sometimes he stills storms. Sometimes he cures diseases. Sometimes he even raises the dead. But most of the time he works behind the scenes.

Whether we can see it or not, our God is in control. But he doesn't feel the need to "flex his almighty muscles" to prove it. He is motivated by love, love for his people in exile, love for his people today. And this morning he comes to us and says: "Don't give up. Do not despair. Do not despair because the Lord is merciful." God's mercy was evident in the way that he addressed his people. He called Israel, "**my people.**" Even though they had been rebellious, God didn't desert them. Even though they had forsaken him, God still considered them his own.

"Then you will know that I am the Lord" (13), God told Israel. This was more than a testimony to God's power. It spoke volumes about his enduring love. But God did more than talk about how much he loved them. The Lord was willing to put his love into action. He said: "**I will put my Spirit in you and you will live" (14)**. The God who made dry bones into living creatures resolved to raise up a nation that was as good as dead in Babylon. God promised to breathe life into them and to revitalize them as a people. But God didn't stop there. He made another promise: "**I will settle you in your own land" (14)**. This promise probably sounded too good to be true. From Ezekiel's perspective, a second Jewish exodus seemed highly improbable. But nothing is impossible with God.

God didn't have to lead his people back to their homeland. They certainly didn't deserve it. And if God had not intervened, the nation of Israel would have slowly disappeared from the face of the earth.

But God did intervene. He did settle his people in their own land. He did save them from extinction. He did it because he loved his people. He did it because he loves us. How is that? Where is the connection? How can something that happened thousands of years ago and thousands of miles away have such a profound affect on you and me?

Picture the nation of Israel as a piece of cloth, perhaps a piece of rough burlap. It is dirty, old and tattered. There are rips and knots and snarls in it. But a closer examination of the burlap stitching reveals that a single gold strand runs through the center of the cloth. That thread is special. That thread is unique. That golden thread represents the line of the Savior. God had mercy on his people even though they rejected him again and again. They grumbled and complained in the wilderness. They worshipped other gods in Israel. At times, God became very angry with them. He allowed foreign powers to dominate them. And it was because of their rebellion that they were carried off to Babylon. God was not pleased with his people, but he never abandoned them. Even in the darkest days of Israel's history, God preserved his people. And he preserved that thin thread, the precious thread that he began to weave in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, the thread that ran through the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the thread that passed through the royal line David and Solomon, the thread that traveled from Judah to Babylon and back again, the thread that came to an end at a manger in a stable in Bethlehem.

The thread that looked so fragile at different times in Israel's history, the thread that looked so many times looked like it was about to break, remained intact. And when the time had fully come, God sent his Son. Jesus came into this world to fulfill Old Testament prophecy. Jesus came to obey his Father's will. Jesus came to live a perfect life in our place. Jesus came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The Lamb who carried the sins of the world to the cross has removed the guilt of our sin forever. The Savior who raised Lazarus from the dead, the Savior who rose from the dead on Easter morning, will raise our dead bodies to eternal life.

If you are troubled by the sin you see all around you, if you are bothered by the sin that lives within you, if you have ever doubted God's power, if you have ever doubted God's love, do not despair. Do not despair because the same God who rescued his people has rescued your soul from death. There will still be days when you feel like you are living in exile, when you feel like your spiritual strength has been sapped, when you feel like you represent a rapidly shrinking minority in a sinful world. If you ever find yourself in a spiritual funk, if you are ever tempted to give up, here is a suggestion. Open up Ezekiel 37 and read about the dry bones.

Read about how God restored his people. Remember that God has revealed himself as the Lord of history. Rejoice because he still directs all things for our good. He gives us hope for today. He gives us hope for eternity. With eyes of faith, with eyes that are fixed on Jesus, we need not ever despair. Why? Because we have a powerful and merciful Lord. Amen.