

Ezekiel 37:1-14

1 The hand of the Lord was on 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.

2 He 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.

3 He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

I said, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

4 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!

5 This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life.

6 I 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.'"

7 So 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.

8 I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

9 Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.'"

10 So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

11 Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.'

12 Therefore prophecy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says: 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.

13 Then you, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them.

14 I 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.'"

WHAT WE CAN'T DO - Rise Again

Welcome to the EKKLESIA, the assembly of believers in the risen Lord Jesus Christ - the Body of Christ. Tonight we begin our Eastertide midweek sermon series (early), WHAT WE CAN'T DO, with the theme of "Rise Again." We are find in the Prophet Ezekiel a resurrection promise from Israel's darkest days.

About ten years ago, Sister a Tesla Fitzgerald was looking for a place to start a food pantry for the Queens, New York, neighborhood of St. Rita's Roman Catholic Church. She found an old store room on the grounds of the church. The spot had been where a couple of handymen had hung out. No one seemed to know what they did, nor could you ever get ahold of them. They'd been gone for couple of years.

When Sister Rita began cleaning out the space, she discovered why the previous occupants had been so difficult to contact, and why they seemed to get so little work done. In a loft, built up over the high ceilinged space she found tables and chairs, telephones, and charts that revealed the former inhabitants' secrets - they were running a gambling operation. They were bookies. Right here, in the center of the parish church they were running an illegal and immoral profiteering enterprise that took advantage of the very poor people Sister Rita wanted to help.

This is a metaphor for what had been going on in Israel, in Ezekiel's time, and what has been going on in our country, and in the church, for a very long time - profit over care for the people God would raise up.

The passage begins with God's calling Ezekiel to prophesy. God calls Ezekiel "Son of Man." What does that mean in Scripture? One of the earliest instances is found in Genesis 17 (verse 17), where Abraham has been told he will have a son. Abraham says, "Can a son be born to man who is a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at ninety?" When the limits of humankind are exceeded by God's intentions, then our God is HOPE.

In Second Samuel we encounter another tragic event, where the limits of humankind have had tragic consequences. King David has been grieving over the dying son born of his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. The Whole court has been frantic. David would not eat or drink or even change his clothes. When the baby dies, David surprises everyone by cleaning up and taking his throne. When questioned, David says, "My son is dead. Why should I go on fasting. Can I bring him back? He cannot come to me, but I will surely go to him some day." The story continues, "He comforted his wife Bathsheba, they made love, she gave birth to another son, and THE LORD LOVED HIM." This child of man, this Son of Man, was loved by God for nothing he had done or could do. He'd just been born. He wasn't deserving of anyone's love, yet. When the limits of humankind are exceeded by God's intentions, God is LOVE.

The third passage that helps me understand God's relationship with the Son of Man is from Luke chapter one. Old Zechariah and his wife are past the years of bearing children, and yet God has intentions for Elizabeth and Zechariah that far exceed human intentions or expectations. Elizabeth's answer to this amazing good news is, "The Lord has done this for me. In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." When human intentions and expectations fall far short, God is HELP, REAL HELP.

God's question to Ezekiel, Son of Man, is, "Can these dry bones live?" Who are, or were, these dry bones. We find the answer in verse 11, ". . . these bones are the people of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, and we are cut off.'" It is the fulfillment of Psalm 88, "I am forsaken among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, who are cut off from Your care." It is as Jeremiah said, "The land has become a desolation, without man or beast; it has been handed over to the Chaldeans." These Chaldeans were the Babylonians. That is where Ezekiel was when he began to listen to God.

Ezekiel was born into a priestly family in roughly 623 BC. He was among the more than 10,000 Israelites who were taken from Judah to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem. Ezekiel had been born when

Josiah was king. Josiah, son of idolatrous Amon, grandson of idolatrous Manasseh, great grandson of righteous Hezekiah, restored the worship of the living God, YAHWEH, to the Israelites in Judah. Josiah did everything according to God's plan until the end, when he disobeyed Jeremiah's warning, and went out to battle Pharaoh Necho. Josiah was struck down in battle, riddled with the arrows of the Egyptians, and died in Jerusalem. And after two short lived kingships, the Babylonians conquered and exiled Ezekiel and his contemporaries.

So Ezekiel was speaking from firsthand experience when he answered God's question, "Can these dry bones live?" by saying, "Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

We feel like we are right where Ezekiel was. We have seen 29% of our economy frozen, the stock market fall from an all time high in the greatest collapse in history, and 701,000 jobs lost, all since the first of the year. Our hopes feel as dead as those Israelite's dry bones. We FEEL the lament of Jeremiah (Lamentations 3), "My soul has been deprived of peace; I have forgotten what prosperity is. So I say, "My strength has perished along with my hope from the LORD."

Why does "the Sovereign Lord alone know" the answer? Why does God alone know if these "dry bones" will live?

We, with all of our wisdom, with all of our knowledge, with all of our predictions and forecasts have surely made a miscalculation in these days. In January, NO ONE would have believed the market would, or even could, collapse. NO ONE believed the evidence coming out of China that this foreign virus could hobble the world, sicken over a million and a half people, and kill over 80,000 people, "sons (and daughters) of man."

In Romans 9, Paul declares the sovereignty of God, "But who are you, O man, to talk back to God? Shall what is formed say to Him who formed it, "Why did You make me like this?" (Verse 20). Jesus quotes the Prophet Isaiah in John chapter 12, "He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, so that they cannot see with their eyes, and understand with their hearts, and turn, and I would heal them." (Verse 40). And the Psalmist reminds us that nothing we do is hidden from God, not our idolatries, not our abuses, not our selfishness, not our arrogance, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me," even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you." (Psalm 139:7-12).

So what does God want from us? In speaking to Ezekiel, God declares, ". . . you will know that I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.'" (Ezekiel 37:14).

Jesus, hounded by the people for signs and wonders, declared, "Unless you people see signs and wonders, you will never believe." (John 4:48). And Peter declares in Acts Chapter 2, "Men of Israel, listen to this message: Jesus of Nazareth was a man certified by God to you by miracles, wonders, and signs, which God did among you through Him, as you yourselves know. He was delivered up by God's set plan and foreknowledge, and you,

by the hands of the lawless, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross.” (Verses 22 and 23). And in First Peter, Chapter 1, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life you inherited from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or spot. He was known before the foundation of the world, but was revealed in the last times for your sake. Through Him you believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and glorified Him; **and so your faith and hope are in God.**” (Verses 18-21). When Jesus hung on that awful cross, abandoned, forsaken, betrayed and denied, he put his faith in the only one who could save him, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” (Luke 23:46).

Jake Owensby, in his latest blog post (April 3, 2020 - Finding God in Messy Places), remembers something that happened when he was nine or ten. “I saw my father raging at my mother and pointing a pistol at her face. Stepping between the gun and my mother—the barrel now leveled at me—I spoke to my father with a calm that I still cannot explain. ‘Don’t shoot my mother. If you kill her, you will go to prison. You will leave me an orphan.’ With a sneer, he spit out the words, ‘You’d be better off an orphan!’ What I heard him say—or more precisely the meaning that settled into my bones—is that the world would be better off without me in it. In a way, my father killed me that night.” Owensby says his father didn’t kill his mother, but he killed in Jake any sense that he was beloved.

He continues, “On the cross, Jesus cried, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46) And in his cry I hear Jesus feeling the misery and the confusion of that **soul-shattering moment** personally. He entered into my grief and sorrow and death with his whole being.”

“Jesus knows what it is like to be so undone that ‘My God!’ is all that you can say. No, that’s not accurate. **He knows what it was like for me to be undone.** For you to be undone. For each creature in this universe to be broken and wounded and buried by the sense that love is nowhere to be found.

“And that is what God’s love in Christ looks like. To join each of us—at the cost of unimaginable pain and suffering—in our very bleakest hour.

“Even your strongest love for yourself ends when you die. But God’s love goes even down to the grave with you. And there is no tomb (no Market collapse, no job loss, no Covid19 diagnosis) that can hold the beloved forever. Remember, WE are beloved, because we love the Beloved Jesus who loves us (**John 16 - 27** the Father himself loves you because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God). Remember, resurrection is coming.”