



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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Pentecost Sunday

May 24, 2015

“Preaching to the Bones”

(Ezekiel 37:9-11, 14)

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“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, 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.”’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet – a vast army. . . These bones are the whole house of Israel. . . I will put my Spirit in you and you will live” (Ezekiel 37:9-11, 14).

COLLECT: O God, on this day You once taught the hearts of Your faithful people by sending them the light of Your Holy Spirit. Grant us in our day by the same Spirit to have a right understanding in all things and ever more to rejoice in His holy consolation; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

One of the columns I like to read in the Watertown Daily Times is “Glimpses from the Past” a150 years ago today. It takes a little portion of Watertown’s newspaper from 150 years ago, and reprints it on the same date 150 years later. So these past five years it’s been following the course of the civil war, and, a few weeks ago, it covered the assassination of President Lincoln, and how the people of Watertown, when they first heard the news, gathered on Main Street to share their grief and anger and speculation.

Here’s a fragment from an article earlier in the course of the war: Sept. 27, 1862. “A few minutes past 1 o’clock the long train arrived [in Watertown]. . . All were quickly on board, the bell rung, three loud cheers arose, and swiftly glided away as much of youth, hope, intelligence, and bravery as ever went out of this city, to take part in the mighty and tragic drama of revolution now being enacted throughout the length and breadth of this continent, and share in the doubtful and changing fortunes of war. Of course, the dearest wish uppermost in all hearts is that these volunteers may ultimately, one and all, return safe and successful, but, considering the extent, perils, exposure and vicissitudes of the desperate conflict we must wage . . . it would be too much to expect that we have not bid adieu to some of them for the last time, however fondly we strive to believe the contrary” (WDT, Sept. 27, 2012). Sure enough, news would come back again and again that another promising young man from Watertown had fallen from either combat or disease.

In any event, those who died in the civil war

were often buried very close to where they fell in makeshift cemeteries. After the war, some 300,000 dead Union Soldiers scattered across the United States were disinterred and reburied in national cemeteries, like Arlington. That's about the most we can do for our war dead . . . to honor them for their sacrifices, remember them, give thanks to God for them, afford them a dignified burial and then live lives worthy of their sacrifices. But we cannot bring them back to life. We cannot reassemble their bodies and breathe into them the breath of life. We cannot resurrect them. Only God can do that.

In the Old Testament lesson, the Lord gives Ezekiel an extraordinary, if not graphic, vision of an "exceedingly great army" but one that has been utterly wiped out. In the vision he places Ezekiel in the middle of a valley full of bones, bones piled together helter skelter. There were craniums and clavicles, ribs and radiuses, teeth and tibias, femurs and fibulas, all bone dry, bleached white by the sun. In the vision, Ezekiel was asked, "Can these bones live?" A ridiculous question, right? They are hopelessly, irrevocably dead.

But the Lord tells Ezekiel, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.'" Even though it was just a vision, surely Ezekiel thought it an exercise in futility. But it is an imperative, and so Ezekiel starts preaching as commanded. As he does, he hears a rattling sound, like the tide going out over a million pebbles. The bones start snapping back together again. It's almost as if they know exactly where they have come from and where they need to go. Each bone searches for its connection. The valley full of scattered bones is transformed into a valley full of skeletons.

Ezekiel continues his proclamation, and onto the skeletons come the tendons and sinews and muscles and organs. It's a horrific sight really, a valley full of cadavers now, but only for a moment because each is soon covered over with skin. So now what we have is

not a pile of bones, nor an army of skeletons. Now we have a bunch of dead people lying around in the valley. So God says, “Prophesy and say to the breath, ‘This is what the Lord says, ‘Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” As Ezekiel obeys and continues his preaching, color comes back to a million pairs of cheeks and the spark to a million pairs of eyes and the breath to a million pairs of lung. Verse 10 says, “and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

It’s a vision about the power and authority of God’s Word. By the Word of God the Lord created us out of the dust, and by the Word of God he recreates us out of the dust. Is anything too hard for God? It makes me think of when Jesus shouted out the words, “Lazarus, come forth!”

Then the Lord said to Ezekiel, “These bones are the whole house of Israel.” Say to 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. . . I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.” Did you notice it? In the vision they already have breath and life, they are already standing on their own two feet, but they’re not really living until God puts his Holy Spirit in them.

You know, right here in Watertown, we have our own valley of dry bones. I’m not talking about the cemeteries. I’m talking about people you and I know and love. They’re not dead, but they’re hardly living. Everywhere we look there is evidence of the spiritual death that dominates our world. What do you see when you look around? Ezekiel saw death. Do you? You see people living their lives, working their jobs, raising their kids, enjoying their hobbies. They may be charming, intellectual, reasonable, and apparently fit, breathing in and out. But God’s Word teaches if they do not know Jesus Christ as Savior, they are spiritually dead. They’re existing, just not alive. Paul tells us that until the Holy Spirit ignites faith in us, we are “. . . dead in our trespasses and sin” (Eph. 2:1). This can be true

of our own family members. It can be true of our neighbors, our coworkers. We should pray that God open our eyes to see the world as he sees it.

Ezekiel saw death. He also saw devastation. The bones were on the surface, exposed, as if after a massive battle the bodies were just left where they lay and never buried. It's one of the worst insults a Jew could suffer. Exposed to the merciless heat of the desert sun, the bones became bright white and very dry, useless, fit for nothing but to be gathered and buried.

We should pray the Lord to open our eyes and help us see the devastation of the world around us. The lost are trapped in sin and its wages. No amount of good works will make up for that. They are spiritually dead. Look at the family ruined by drugs and alcohol. Look at the marriage ruined by infidelity. Look at folks, who, on the surface seem so happy, yet have no ultimate hope for life after death. They need someone to point them to the Savior Jesus Christ. Until we see people as God sees them, we will not be moved to reach them with the Gospel.

Ezekiel saw death and devastation. He also saw defeat. "Behold", they say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost. . ." What a terrible life it must be to live without hope. We should pray God open our eyes to the hopelessness in the world. The restlessness of the nations, the strife in our cities, the constant threat of warfare, of disease, of terrorism, of death, being caught in a dead end job, the break-down of the family . . . it all chips away at peace and hope. But we have the peace of God that surpasses all understanding, and the kind hope that can come only from God. May God stir up our hearts for those who don't.

Don't just bemoan their choices. Don't just pity them. Let your heart be moved to compassion for them, as Jesus was moved. Let your heart move also your feet, so that you go to them and don't wait for them to come to you. Let your heart, and the faith the Holy Spirit has given you, fill also your mouth with the

clear Gospel message they need to hear. Our Savior died to save them from their sins and give them peace and hope and life. You have that message. You know that message. They need that message.

In the text it's the Word of the Lord that brings about life. This text reminds us of another, "My Word does not return to me empty" God promised in Isaiah, "but accomplishes my purposes" (Is. 55). Even when shared by ordinary people, God's Word still does the job. Paul wrote, "We have this treasure in pots of clay" St. Paul says, implying there's nothing special about the vessels. We're common, simple, run-of-the-mill, but we do house the treasure, the Word. And it's that living Word of God that does the work, not the vessel. Through the Word the Holy Spirit starts rearranging our thoughts and beliefs and priorities, even as it rearranged those dry bones.

Romans 10 says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (v. 17). Only through the sharing of the Word of God will there be "a rattling sound" as the bones come together, bone to bone (v. 7). Hebrews 4 says, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes".

So what does the world need to hear? It doesn't need to hear about us, our denomination, our politics, our opinions. "We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2 Cor. 4:5). It needs to hear the Gospel of grace. It needs to hear the truth that out of love for the world Jesus died for the sins of the world. It needs to hear that he lives, and so there is hope and peace and forgiveness and life and salvation in Christ. The world needs to hear about him, and it is your responsibility to tell them, not just somebody else's. It needs to see his love, and it is your responsibility to show his love, to be his hands and feet in the world, not just somebody else's. In Mark 16 Jesus says to his church, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. And whoever believes and

is baptized will be saved” (v. 15-16).

When you look at the world, what do you see? Ezekiel saw death, devastation and defeat and the Lord stirred him to unleash God’s living, Spirit-filled Word. I must confess that sometimes when I look at the world I become angry. I see the things people do, and hear what they say. I see lives not worthy of the sacrifices so many have made for them. I see the hatred many have for God, and for the Gospel and it bothers me, angers me, disheartens me.

Then, I remember if it were not for the grace of God I would be all those things. But somebody cared enough to carry me to a font for Holy Baptism. Somebody, many teachers, in fact, cared enough to tell me about Jesus. The Lord used people to reach out to me with grace and mercy. The Holy Spirit was in their words. The people may not have felt the power of the Spirit in their words, but that’s how the Holy Spirit works, quietly, covertly even, behind the scenes, within the water and the words.

In verse 14, the Lord says, “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” In Word and Baptism the Lord has put his Spirit in you. You are alive in Christ. Now God wants to do this for others through you, through your words.

Think again of the valley of dry bones as Ezekiel first saw it. Ephesians 2: “Once you were dead in your trespasses and sin . . . But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us . . . made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

