

Pentecost 2021 – 23 May 2021 Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones...well hear the word of the Lord.

I remember hearing that song as a child – kinda a neat song. I guess it was a spiritual – but I remember hearing it all over the place.

Dem bones dem bones, dem dry bones ...What is it they are supposed to hear? (The word of the Lord).

Dry bones. Connecting to one another in a valley of death.

And most folks who sing that song probably don't know that it is a vision that one of the prophets had. One of Ezekiel's visions. This is something that God gave to a prophet to see, and then to say to the people.

Why did they need to hear this?

Here was the nation of Israel. God had sent them a number of people to warn them about their not listening to him.

One of those prophets was Ezekiel. He told them that because they weren't listening to God, they would end up going into captivity – they were going to be punished at the hands of the Babylonians.

Words weren't being very effective. So God started to do some strange things.

One of the words for prophet (in Greek not Hebrew) actually means "crazy person". So I guess that is fitting as you look at this particular prophet.

He had all the right credentials. Ezekiel had the right pedigree. He was a priest. So he was in the right family to be telling people what God's word was. One of the first things that Ezekiel did after being called to prophecy was to go outside the city, and lay under a tree. He lay on one side for 390 days. After that, he laid on his other side for 40 days.

That is a little strange – isn't it?

But it was done in order to give a message. The message was that the northern kingdom – the northern half of Israel would enter into exile, and would be there for 390 years.

The southern half of the kingdom – well they would only be in exile for 40 years – what was considered one generation within the Biblical times.

OK – so what else did this crazy person do?

Well, in a time when they had plenty of food – he weighed out his food very carefully. In order to tell the people that they would be doing that in the future, because they would be starving. But we still haven't gotten to this vision yet – this is just what is going on for the people of the nation of Israel.

Dem bones...dem bones...dem dry bones – what was it that they need to hear? (The word of the Lord).

Ezekiel offered some other signs as well.

His wife died unexpectedly. I know and a number of you here know what that feels like. It is a shock, even when it is expected.

But God told him that he wasn't to mourn. His job was to show the people that they wouldn't have the strength to mourn when the town of Jerusalem would fall.

I have seen a few people who stifled their grieving. When you do that, there is something inside that becomes dried up and feeling dead.

All these sort of crazy things Ezekiel was saying and doing – and so that is what people thought about him, that he was crazy. Then all that he said happened.

Their homes were destroyed. The land was ravaged by the Babylonians.

They had thought that there was no way that God would allow their beautiful temple to be destroyed – but it was.

And so many of them thought that perhaps there was no God – or that the God who called Abraham and the rest was really nothing. All they experienced was the result of them working against the will of God. This was the results of them not listening to the Word of God.

Where is He, they cried. One of the Psalms says that their captors called out “sing us one of the songs of Zion.” And the psalmist asks, “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.”

God had turned his face from them. They felt no hope. They believed that they had no reason to even think to hope.

Individually, today’s Psalm points out how God knits us piece by piece in the womb. But the vision Ezekiel has is a response to exactly how the people felt...dead, dried bones. Bones bleached by the desert. But thousands upon thousands of them, because it was the whole nation.

A picture of the people that was desolate. It was as if the flesh had been ripped from them. There was no muscle. There was nothing inside the rib cage. All that was left was decaying dry bones.

Dried up enough that if they were dropped on the ground, they would shatter. If you picked up those bones, they would turn to dust in your hands. The people were empty shells, dragging themselves along.

You have seen a few people in life. People who were living that devoid of hope. But I can only think of one that was that emptied.

Jean had been living with a guy. They weren’t married, and that went against her faith. It didn’t bother him, because he didn’t have a faith in God. But she continued to live with him.

Bob sold drugs. All that meant that she got wrapped up in his lifestyle. It tore her apart inside. Finally, with some help, she left him.

She was free of him for about a week. Then she went back to their apartment to pick up her stuff. She chose a time that she knew Bob wouldn’t be home.

But when she went in the apartment – he was home. He made threats. Well before, he had made threats against her – but not this time. He told her that he would kill himself if she left.

That trapped her. Something died inside. Everything seemed to turn off. She was hopeless, dead inside, because she didn’t want to see him kill himself.

That was the only way that she could cope if she was to choose to stay with him...to be dead inside. There was no hope of ever escaping his grasp.

She needed hope. She needed life. She needed breath. But all that she allowed to be there was a shadow of a person...a skeleton moving about.

God showed Ezekiel a whole nation of these ‘walking dead’.

The God who had created man, and breathed life into the physical body asked, “Can these dead bones live again?”

Ezekiel was bright. He didn't really answer the question, but put it back on the only one who could answer it. "By your word only," he said.

In creation the Spirit of God breathed on the man to give him life. Now the same spirit would breathe again. It would not just resuscitate the dead bones, but resurrect a nation without hope. Only God could do this to the totally dead.

Now, by the Word of God the spirit came to dead dry bones.

As a sidelight for you, the word "inspired" means "God breathed". So, when we speak of the inspired scriptures, we are really saying that this is a word that carries the life-giving breath of God. We are not talking about a dictation from God, but about the very thing that the scripture does when you read it – breath the breath of God into you.

Back to the story of Ezekiel.

Dem bones...dem bones...dem dry bones....(hear the word of the Lord).

Notice who this inspired word comes to first. It comes to dry bones. When it came to them – they obeyed. Even on deaf ears, dead skeletons, the Spirit brings it's effect.

There is Ezekiel standing in an open field of bones telling them what to do. They listen. They come to life. The Spirit of God descends on them. Life becomes theirs. Even though they can't realize what is going on, their ears could not fully receive the great word, yet they obeyed.

The Spirit of God brings life to those who hear His word. They were dry bones that Ezekiel spoke to – but they were not the only dry bones that heard the word.

Dem bones dem bones dem dry bones (hear the word of the Lord).

The Spirit of God brings life to those who hear God's word. Those who gathered at a festival in Jerusalem 2000 some years ago probably would not have described themselves as dry bones when they came. They were coming to the Holy City – the Holy place for one of the traditional festivals that day.

It was one of the things that many good Jews would do – they would come to the holiest place they knew to celebrate what God had done. Like you might see some make a pilgrimage to a home church for Easter and Christmas when they visit family.

They would not have described themselves as anything other than good religious folks – trying to be faithful.

But they were resurrected that day. They were joined to Christ through baptism – his death and resurrection became theirs.

The Spirit breathed new life into them. 3000 were buried in baptism...and then resurrected in Christ.

They formed a new fellowship.

They began telling others, "This dead skeleton, which was dead in sin, now is alive."

And so the church was born. The church is simply the gathering of those who hear the Word of God. It isn't a building – but a people.

It is the people who were inspired – that is the breath of God breathed on them.

That breath...that inspiration...is now our source of life. We come today acknowledging our dependence on God for all that we ARE.

Without that breath of God, we are the valley of dry bones. But the Spirit of God brings life to those who hear his word.

That Spirit gave life to the new church on Pentecost. That Spirit is as vital for who we are as our breath is today.

There is a final thing that Ezekiel has to tell us about the Spirit.

(Taking my hands, cupping them and blowing in them).

Feel the spirit. It moves. But if you try to hold the wind, it only escapes your grasp. You cannot control the Spirit. It controls you. It becomes you to exhale into the world. You breathe that word of life given to you.

The Spirit of God brings life to those who hear his word, and it fills you up – making you alive. May that Spirit continue to give life – new life to each of us – whether we feel like dry bones or not.

Amen.