

Pentecost – B
LSB #584
Text – Ezekiel 37:4

Then he said to me, “Prophesy over these bones, & say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’”

DRY BONES, HEAR!

John Smith was the only Protestant to move into a large Catholic neighborhood. On the 1st Friday of Lent, John was outside grilling a big juicy steak on his grill, while all his neighbors were eating cold tuna fish for supper. This went on each Friday of Lent. On the last Friday, the neighborhood men got together & decided that something had to be done about John.

He was tempting them to eat meat on the Fridays of Lent & they couldn’t take it anymore so they thought to try & convert John to a Catholic. They went & talked to him & were so relieved when he decided to join all of his neighbors & become Catholic.

They took him to church & the Priest sprinkled some water over him, saying, “You were born a Baptist, you were raised a Baptist, but now you are a Catholic.” John was amazed how simple it was to become Catholic, & the neighbor men were thankful that their biggest Lenten temptation was resolved.

The following year, Lent rolled around, & the 1st Friday, as the neighborhood was sitting down to their cold tuna fish dinner, the wafting smell of steak cooking on a grill came floating by. The neighborhood men couldn’t believe their noses! What was going on? They called each other up & agreed to meet in John’s yard to see if he’d forgotten what day it was?

The group arrived just in time to see John standing over his grill with a small pitcher of water. He was sprinkling some of it over his steak on the grill, saying, “You were born a cow, you were raised a cow, but now you are a fish.” **PAUSE**

That’s quite an old joke & it’s been around the Internet for at least 15 years, but it makes

a good lead in for today’s sermon, & it ties in well with the Sacrament of Baptism. We struggle with the sin we see & experience in this life. It’s everywhere. It damages everything, even if we’re not aware of the damage it’s doing, or has already done. Sin, & the effects of sin, are like the valley that is full of very dry bones.

It would have been a repulsive sight in Ezekiel’s day. In his culture, if you found an unburied body, it was a sure & certain sign that the person left for dead had been cursed & damned. In no way, shape or form, would such a person have deserved life.

Part of the message Yahweh gives Ezekiel, through this vision, is that here lies an entire army of the damned. The context from history is that the southern kingdom of Judah had already been conquered & taken into exile in Babylon. Their army had been defeated. The nation had been punished for their arrogance, & for their refusal to trust in Yahweh alone.

The people of Judah had become like a valley, filled, with very dry bones. Exile might as well have been death & damnation as far as the people were concerned. The situation looked hopeless, as voiced by the people themselves in the reading from Ezekiel, “Our bones are dried up & our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.”

Today, do you know of anyone who's feeling hopeless? Are you aware of somebody who's feeling all alone, isolated, cut off? Like a valley, full, of very dry bones, would you dare to admit it if that someone were you? **PAUSE**

The vast majority of us will not, unless we're pressured into it, & that is what God's discipline is for, to pressure us in the right direction. Our sinful nature is arrogant & rebellious to the core. We deserve nothing but death & damnation. Without Christ we are nothing. As far as good deeds go, we perform about as many as a valley can, full, of very dry bones.

We struggle with the sin we see & experience in this life. It's everywhere. It damages everything, even if we're not aware of the damage it's doing, or has already done. "...can these bones live?" that's the question Yahweh asked of Ezekiel, & asking the question was the purpose for which the Lord brought him out & set him down in the middle of the valley; a valley full of very dry bones.

People go to the doctor with a minor ailment & leave with a devastating diagnosis. A car accident takes the life of someone very unexpectedly. A few bad decisions are strung together & jail time arrives. Over in Monroe, MI they're searching for a five year old girl who disappeared under some very disturbing circumstances.

When we're confronted with the ugliness of sin in our lives, "...can these bones live?" is the question Yahweh is asking you & me. Ezekiel wasn't so sure, so he pleads ignorance, "O Lord God, you know." Yahweh's answer to Ezekiel, "Prophecy over these bones, & say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'"

The vision given to Ezekiel is God's way of telling him that King David's line, the nation of Judah, would one day be set free from the exile in Babylon. In a sense, they'd be brought back to life again from the deathlike captivity of exile. Jerusalem would be restored when Nehemiah is sent to rebuild the city walls & the temple.

In the vision Ezekiel prophesied as he "...was commanded, & as [he] prophesied, there was a sound, & behold, a rattling, & the bones came together, bone to its bone.

And [he] looked, & behold, there were sinews on them, & flesh had come upon them, & skin had covered them." Ezekiel watches in amazement as the divine words of his prophecy are effective.

He'd spoken the word Yahweh commanded him to, & those dry bones obeyed, but there was still no breath in them. They're lifeless, like unbelieving humans beings, flesh, but without life. Next, God said to Ezekiel, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, son of man, & say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, & breathe on these slain, that they may live.'" Then the prophet prophesied as commanded, "... & the breath came into them, & they lived & stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army."

The OT reading takes Ezekiel from being the spokesman of human helplessness, "O Lord God, you know," into the spokesman of divine omnipotence. He proclaims that what is about to be done will be accomplished through the medium of God's Word, by which Yahweh has the power to fulfill whatever He promises to His people.

The vision is modeled after the creation story of Genesis 2 where the lump of clay doesn't become a living being until Yahweh breathes 'the breath of life' into it. Yet, this is not a 1st creation, but a new creation. Historically, this vision, as mentioned,

predicts the release from exile in Babylon & the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem by Nehemiah.

God's people had been rescued from captivity in Egypt, & then from Babylon. Yet, at Baptism God rescues us from our captivity to sin, & at the final resurrection Yahweh will rescue us from our captivity to death. This vision is also a prediction of that great, final resurrection day when the breath of God will come into all the dead, & they shall live once again.

In Baptism, our Lord God takes action. He speaks the Words of life, dry bones hear, & a child of God is created. One, who was physically born, is born again, this time spiritually. This morning, through the waters of Baptism which He commanded as a blessing, Yahweh Himself called Chasey to be His own, & now she is.

It was not by her own works, not by her own efforts, not by her own decision, but simply by the Word of God connected to the water as Jesus commanded. As sinful human beings, we can reject God's work at Baptism, just like we can reject His Word, but if we do so, the fault does not lie with Baptism, or with the Word of God, but with our stubborn & selfish heart. The stubborn & selfish heart of the nation of Judah had brought about its destruction & the following captivity in Babylon. That was the Lord's discipline to encourage them to return to Him from the false gods of this world.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree.'" The valley, full of very dry bones, a vast army that had died under the curse of sin, can be seen as a vision of Jesus hanging on the cross, enduring hell, cursed for the sins of the whole world.

Then on Easter Sunday our Savior's lifeless body, receives the breath of life from the Spirit of God, & He lives.

We struggle with the sin we see & experience in this life. It's everywhere. It damages everything. Violence & destruction, betrayal & abandonment, sickness & death, all are bound to stake their claims on us, but they will not have the last word. Jesus did when He said, "It is finished." Then He rose from death three days later to prove that His Word is true.

Dry bones do hear in God's kingdom. The story about John Smith, & the steak he was grilling, might be meant to make fun of what goes on at Baptism, but the illustration is accurate. In essence, God took you & me, born as sinners, dead, dry bones, applied the waters of Baptism connected to His Word, & now we are children of God, holy in His sight.

Today's reading from Ezekiel uses the verb meaning, "to live again, to come back to life," six different times. At Jesus' death the graves were opened & many of the saints who'd fallen asleep were raised. The atoning death of God's Son is thereby shown to be the basis for the resurrection of all believers to everlasting life.

The Gospel of John speaks of an hour coming when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, & those who hear will live. An hour is coming when all the dry bones that have ever lived will hear His voice & come out. Later in the Gospel of John, Jesus illustrates that point as He calls forth Lazarus from the tomb. **PAUSE**

Have you ever noticed the silence left by one who is absent here on Sunday? I'm sure you've noticed the silence of one who's lying in a casket. At death Jesus gave up

His Spirit & hung in silence on the cross. The next time you read Ezekiel 37, listen for the silence of a vast valley, filled, with very dry bones.

Then, remember that the Word of God is almighty, & with it, even dry bones hear. Amen.

Faith & truth & life bestowing, open now the Scriptures, Lord, seed to life eternal sowing, scattered on the wind abroad. Let not hearts, Your Word receiving, like a barren field be found, choked with thorns & unbelieving, shallow earth or stony ground. May the Spirit's power unceasing bring to life the hidden grain, daily in our hearts increasing, bearing fruit that shall remain. So in Scripture, song, & story, Savior may Your voice be heard. Till our eyes behold Your glory give us ears to hear Your Word. Amen.