

Sermon – March 29, 2020
The Rev. John C. Wright

Text – Ezekiel 37:1-14

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them to be a blessing for your people, a blessing that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Amen

Good morning everyone. I pray that you are all doing well and thank you for joining us this morning for worship. Today we are looking at one of the well-known texts of the Old Testament, a prophecy from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel's writings are words from God that are characterized by vivid images, and this morning's scripture is an example of such a vision, the valley of dry bones. Prophecy is always a call to God's people for them to return to God, and often prophecy has multiple applications, a near-term application, which, in the book of Ezekiel, is generally focused on those in exile dispersed in other countries, and a longer-term or future application, which is for the people of God for all time. Let's hear the words of this prophecy fresh this morning and then look at how these words applied to exiles for Israel and how they apply to us today.

This morning's scripture reading is from Ezekiel 37:1 – 14.

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath,

and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.”

This is the word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The hand of the LORD comes upon the prophet Ezekiel. This is the prophets’ way of expressing that God has reached out to him and has taken him into a prophetic vision. Ezekiel is not physically transported to some place, but is taken in the spirit of the LORD into a vision, a place where God’s word is revealed to the prophet. The vision is not a blurry, dreamlike state where memory is vague, but a sharp, clear vision where details are remembered and words are given. For the prophet Ezekiel, this is a very real event. The passage of time is different from how we think of time. Ezekiel, as God’s hand comes upon him, is absorbed into what God reveals to him, and it impacts him. In this vision state, Ezekiel is able to see, hear, and use his mind. He is able to speak to God and speak the words that God gives him to speak. Ezekiel is in the presence of the LORD and yet he is not stricken with fear.

In this vision, Ezekiel is taken to a large valley and he sees it is filled with bones that lie strewn across the valley in every direction. He is placed in the midst of these strewn bones and is led by God around this valley where he looks at the bones. God seems to want Ezekiel to see them all and realize how many there are in this place. The bones are everywhere and are on top of the ground, not buried as would be the custom for Israel. Later, during Ezekiel’s dialogue with God, we will learn that these are the bones of those who were slain in battle and not buried. They represent on one level those men of Israel who died in the battles that occurred before the exiles of the northern and southern tribes of Israel, and they have been left in the valley unburied. They speak to a great slaughter of the people of Israel; there are many who were slain. Leaving the bodies of those defeated in battle on the field is the custom of Middle Eastern conquerors who came and took away into exile first the northern and later the southern tribes of Israel. It is how these conquerors dealt with those who did not surrender. They were slain, and their bodies were cast out into the open fields. It was a sign to other people of what would happen to them if they resisted the conquering king. It speaks to a great judgement and the death of those who are

judged. Their bodies were left on the ground in the open for the birds of the air to eat their flesh and the sun to bake their bones. These bones are seen by Ezekiel as he is led through them as very dry bones. There remains no life among them at all. These bones have been exposed to the elements for a long time. They are without life. They are disassembled and strewn across the ground. This multitude has been dead for a long time.

Why are these dead in the valley? We have already encountered the idea of the bones being a warning to other people about the might of the conquering king, but these bones also speak to the exiles, those who survived the ordeal, and of the recognition God has for their situation. It speaks to the exiles, who have been cut off from their land and from the presence of the LORD that they had once enjoyed, as a recognition by God of their situation. Exiles hearing these words or reading them would relate to the valley of dry bones as the LORD recognizing their situation, their anguish, as exiles in a foreign land. This vision is God recognizing that they are a people in need of His steadfast love.

As we hear these words today and then form an image of a valley strewn with dry bones in our minds, we should ask ourselves spiritual questions about how this scene applies to us today. Are we spiritually dead and a just a valley of dry bones? Does this vision in the valley look forward in time to when we live, and speak to us as lifeless bones that have been dead to God for a long time? Could God be using this image to speak to a time when His people are cut off from life with Him and are but dead bones without life, without a hope of being reconciled to God? Is this prophecy for a time when we need to ask ourselves, “Are we lifeless bones or are we filled with the spirit of God and powerfully living for Him?” Is this prophecy for us today to let us know that we also are a people in need of God’s steadfast love?

As we ponder this valley of bones and the judgement it represents, we hear God ask Ezekiel a question about what he has been shown, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel does not answer the question directly, but gives an answer that puts the outcome into God’s hand and will. Ezekiel’s response to God is that if God wills, these dry bones can live. This is a key aspect of this prophecy. If God wills, the exiles can live again in the promised land with God. For us today, if we are separated from God, and God wills, we also can become alive in God. This is an amazing response to God’s question. What will God do? What does God will for these lifeless bones? What is God’s will for His lifeless people today?

God answers by giving Ezekiel words to speak to lifeless bones that are without ears to hear. Listen to these words again, “O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you

shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD.” Ezekiel speaks these words to the bones, and as he does, he hears a noise, bones rattling as they come together and return to their places. Then Ezekiel sees sinews appear on the assembled bones. Flesh comes upon them and skin covers them. The bodies of the slain are re-formed, yet these re-formed bodies lie on the ground as lifeless bodies. Ezekiel sees they are bodies fully re-formed but having no breath. They lack something to give them life. Those in exile are bodies trying to live apart from God. They are living without the presence of God. They are those who have no breath of God in them.

We also need to ask ourselves if we too are those without God’s breath breathed into us. Are we useless bodies fully formed but living with no real life? Are we busy going about our work, play, and existence, yet without real life? Are we those who do not have the breath of God within us? Are we yet alive?

God speaks again, giving words to Ezekiel to speak to these lifeless bodies, words to bring God’s breath upon these re-formed bodies. “Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” The Hebrew word here translated as breath is “ruach” and it can mean wind or breath or spirit of God. This word translated as spirit of God occurs some 100 times in the Old Testament. The spirit of God is a key aspect of what God does to bring life into creation. The breath of God is breathed into the first man after he is formed from dust at creation. And, when Ezekiel speaks for the creative spirit of God to come from all points of the creation to this place where re-formed bodies lie waiting, the breath of God comes and enters the bodies, and the bodies stand up on their feet, a vast multitude! The people of God, filled with the spirit of God, are a vast multitude, alive and ready to be lives enlisted into the army of the people of God. For those in exile, this is a picture of hope. The ruach, the very breath of God, can yet fill them and bring them again into God’s presence. It is a message of the coming of God’s steadfast love to them in their exile. It is a message of hope for those without hope. We need to ask ourselves, is there hope for us today to be filled with the breath of God? We need to ask if we can be filled with God’s breath. Can we experience God’s steadfast love today? Are we also those who are filled with the Spirit of God and are standing on our feet ready to go forth with God’s presence, in the power of God, into God’s mission? We believe that the Holy Spirit is given at baptism to believers. We who have believed in Jesus Christ and have received God’s steadfast love and been baptized should be filled with the Holy Spirit. We should be an army on our feet ready to go forth in the power and strength of the Lord into God’s mission to reconcile all of His people to him. We must ask ourselves, “Are we filled with the breath of God? Are we even open to the filling of the Holy Spirit? Are we willing to be visited by the spirit of God? Are we yet alive?” These are difficult

questions for us. This was a difficult prophecy for people who were in exile and had lost hope of experiencing God's steadfast love again, of ever being in the promised land again with the presence of God.

God provides an interpretation of this vision of dried bones for Ezekiel. God tells him that this vision is for the whole of Israel, north and south, all of those who are part of Israel. Those in exile are in despair, and in despair speak to their bones as being dried up. They are empty. They hunger for God's steadfast love and the promised land they once knew. Yet they have no hope to ever return to that blessed place. They remain in exile in foreign lands where they are threatened, abused, and crushed by their loss. Notice that in all of this vision it is God who acts. It is the word of God that re-forms the dry bones. It is the spirit of God that brings a vast army to their feet. God will open the graves and bring the people of Israel, those now in exile, up from the place of the dead, from their separation from His presence, from their removal from the promised land. God in His steadfast love will put His spirit in those who are dead and they will live. Life will once again be abundant, on their own soil, in the place God has prepared for them. God loves, God speaks, and God acts. For the exiles this is good news, and over time, they are able to return to the land and begin to seek to dwell there with God again. For us, separated in time from the near-term fulfilment of this prophecy, we wonder if we are included in the whole people of Israel. We wonder if God's steadfast love is still present in our day.

The near-term prophesy is to the exiles and indicates a return to Israel and to the presence of God upon the promised land He had given them. The far-term prophesy is to a people who are also dead, dried-up bones, but whom God will bring up from the grave and in whom He will put His spirit and enable them to live. God loves, God speaks, and God acts. We are in the season of Lent, a time when we should ask ourselves, "Are we dried up bones? Are we yet alive?" But we are also Easter people, a people who know the Good News that Jesus Christ came and paid our sin debt that we might no longer be separated from God. Jesus came that we might be adopted into the whole of Israel, and God's breath, God's creative breath, might be breathed into us. We also are now a people who are able to have the very breath of God, ruach, breathed into us that we might stand up and be part of a vast army for God, those ready to enter into God's mission to all people. We are those who have experienced the steadfast love of the Lord and are re-formed by that love. The season of Lent is drawing to a close, a season when we have pondered the question, "Are we yet alive?" And as we have pondered that question, we have begun to hunger for the ruach, the breath of God, to be breathed fresh into us. We look afresh at the coming of Christ and his journey to the cross, a journey to reconcile to God all who will believe in Jesus.

Come, Holy Spirit, open our hearts to receive a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit that we might be those who are standing on our feet filled with the power of your breath and going forth into your mission to all people. Let us be people who are alive for God.

Around us are those who are dead because they have never heard of Jesus Christ and what he has done for them. They do not know of the steadfast love of God. They are unaware that it is God's will to breath His breath into them and make them alive again. They are bones, dried in the sun, long dead. They are those who think they cannot be loved again; they are so broken and unloved that they believe they are beyond the steadfast love of God. They are truly dried bones, long dead, those without hope. The army of spirit-filled people of God standing on their feet is to go out into the world and share the Good News that God so loves them that he sent His son to die in their place that they may be reconciled to Him. God's will is to bring His creative spirit from the four winds of the earth to breathe a new spirit into them and give them life again. If we are alive, let us be about God's mission of telling others of the love God has for them. Let us bring hope to them that they may be brought up from their graves and experience God's steadfast love in Jesus Christ.

Pray with me: Father we confess to you that we are a people who are but dried up bones spread out in the valley. Lord, come and reform us and breath your breath into us that we might be a people standing on our feet filled with the Holy Spirit and going forth into your mission to all people.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Go forth into Jesus' mission.