

Breathe, O Forgotten Bones

The ancient rabbis were disturbed by the book of Ezekiel... by all the crazy visions and teachings. Consequently, a number of them warned against reading it in the synagogues and even ruled that persons under the age of 30 were forbidden from reading portions of the book. And so I find it only fitting that this text falls on Youth Sunday. Our lesson from Ezekiel opens with a scene of the Lord leading the prophet Ezekiel by the spirit to a valley full of skeletal remains. As Ezekiel surveys this valley to which God's spirit has led him, he describes what appears to be a vast army, defeated... no, rather I should say: massacred. The Lord then asks Ezekiel what seems to be a trick question: Gazing out together over a valley full of bones, the Lord asks, "*Son of Adam: Tell me what you think, can these bones live?*" Ezekiel surveys the scene, once again noticing that, not only are these bones great in number, but they are also sun-bleached, bare bones... dry bones. Perhaps the best way to translate the "technical nuance" of the Hebrew here is to say that these folks are dead... dead, dead, dead.

In the world of medicine we sometimes hear accounts of people who have died a short time, but whose bodies were brought back to life. Perhaps you have heard the urban legends from centuries ago of persons whose bodies supposedly came back to life after burial. You know that old Halloween story in which a body is exhumed only to find scratches on the inside of the coffin and fingernails bent back. When I was a youth growing up in Texas there was one particularly non-conventional youth counselor at our church who, by telling us this story in rather dramatic prose, scared the living daylights out of some of us Junior High boys. According to an article I read over the internet – and we all know that is a sure sign of reliability – the era when these stories originated was a time in medicine before embalming was common practice. The medical community was learning sometimes in cases of drowning or suffocation that the victims could be revived shortly after death. And so the line between life and death was blurred slightly. Thus fear, the best of all marketing devices, caused a flurry of patents and sales in coffins fitted with escape hatches in case the tenant happened to experience second thoughts.

The point Ezekiel is making here is that these people were not simply hopeless, in poor spirits, or mostly dead... they were dead, dead, dead. No escape hatches here. So

Ezekiel responds to the Lord's question with rather a bit of wisdom and cautiousness.

[God:] *"Can these bones live, Ezekiel?"* [Ezekiel:] *"Beats me, Lord? You are the one to know?"*

But now the Lord calls upon Ezekiel to do the outrageous. [God:] *"I want you to prophesy to those bones,"* says God, *"I want you say to the bones: Dry bones, hear what the Lord has to say... 'I am going to cause breath to enter you. I am going to stack flesh and skin upon you and put breath into you... and you will live.... then, THEN, you shall know that I am the Lord!'"* Up until this point in the book, Ezekiel has had every preacher's dream job: the distinct joy of prophesying God's impending wrath to a group of unresponsive listeners. Aren't we both glad that is not me today?

But now God calls Ezekiel to change game plans and prophesy to the dead. Whether things are looking up for our prophet friend I will let you decide. In any case, Ezekiel does as he is told, and as he prophesies the Spirit of God breaks into time and space crushing notions of possibility. A great noise envelops him, a quaking of sorts as bone comes together with bone, and bodies, moments ago scattered, are now gathered and assembled until Ezekiel finds himself staring at a valley full of zombies... a valley full of bodies that have been given shape and form, yet lack the power of life's breath. At this point I am ready to say "Amen," pack it up, and call it a day, but God is not content just yet. It turns out God is not satisfied with dead things... never has been.

And so God charges Ezekiel a second time, continuing a play on the Hebrew word in this passage translated as each breath, wind, and spirit: [God:] *"Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, O Son of Adam, The Lord says this: 'Come from the four breaths, o breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.'"* Again, Ezekiel does as he is told, and breath enters these bodies and they come to life, standing to their feet a vast multitude, a people once forgotten.

It seems to me that if the book of Ezekiel is about anything in particular, at its core it is an account of the holy presence of God, and it is a story about property rights. Let me explain. It so happens that this tale of unraveling yarn is lodged in the beginning of the sixth century before Jesus. The land of Palestine was smack in the middle of a vast geo-political struggle for control over what is the present day Middle East... sound familiar? It should! This has been the story of the Holy Land for several millenniums.

The southern kingdom of Palestine, that is Judah, was being threatened by a new power player to the region: Babylon and its king: Nebuchadnezzar. According to Ezekiel, the people of Judah had been exceedingly unfaithful to the God who had brought them out from slavery in Egypt, who had made a covenant with them, and had given the land of Palestine as an inheritance.

God even decided very uniquely to situate his presence among the people and to dwell in the Jerusalem temple in a way that would make God known among all the nations through this special relationship. But now the people did not believe God could take back what had been given them, even if they had defiled it and made a mockery of God before the nations. And so God calls on Ezekiel to warn the nation about God's judgment and their impending doom— ultimately, that God would withdraw his life-giving presence from them. But they would not and did not listen. They believed God was stationary... that God was confined to Jerusalem and the temple. They believed they had property rights to the land... property rights to God's very life-giving Spirit.

Throughout history, God's people have often fallen into the illusion to think that somehow God is bound to us in the way a servant is to a master. Time and again, the Lord has shown that he is not something we may possess or take for granted. And so Ezekiel tells us that God's Spirit left the defiled temple in Jerusalem – the center of faith and hope for the children of Abraham and Isaac – and, in fact, even left the people, those God claimed as his own. God's breath was their life and hope. It is not long after breath leaves the body that the body stumbles and fails. And so Judah was utterly destroyed along with the temple and all but the most poor and weak were taken into exile to remain for several generations— a pile of bones, dry and forgotten.

This is where our story picks up today... a place from which God's spirit had long since departed. A scene marked by what was once overwhelming defeat and desperation, but now even the desperation of a crumbling people is forgotten and only bones are left to whisper the hushed tale. Yet the story moves on to show that God's very breath is life, which is bound only by the limitlessness of God's imagination. After all, this is the same God whose Spirit creates things out of nothing and even re-creates that which is dead, broken down, or seemingly useless. God's Spirit is what creates the people of God.

In order to “put meat on these bones,” if you will, let me explain. God’s Spirit created the people of God as the nation Israel. Our lesson from Ezekiel recounts how God’s Spirit breathed life into a nation and a people where previously there were only dry and forgotten bones. God’s Spirit also creates the people of God as the church, and we find that in our lesson from Acts this morning. Here God’s breath descends upon the house of praying disciples, empowering them, causing tongues of fire to descend upon them. And we find God’s saving story being shared in all languages that all people might know their Creator. No, neither death, nor communication boundaries prove match for the power of God’s Spirit... that same breath which creates the church and draws God’s people to life.

To a great extent, it seems we have lost sense of God’s creative imagination, that sense of imagination which sees in bones not dead things, but living things. The human way is to see the world through cause and effect, more or less, possible and impossible. “*But this is not my way,*” says God. Where the world sees a crucified messiah, God sees resurrection and life. God’s creative and redemptive spirit is one rich in imaginative power. It takes an imagination to create, to leave behind notions of probability, cause and effect, more or less, but instead to see things entirely new with God’s possibilities, with God’s vision for reality — a vision always creating, always wanting to give life. No, God is not satisfied with dead things... never has been.

By causing new life to spring up in the bone and marrow of our bodies, our church, our world, the Spirit of God makes God present and known to the world. Looking back to Ezekiel, three times in these fourteen verses God declares to the people that after raising to life the withered bones of the house of Israel “*Then you shall know that I am the Lord.*” For according to Ezekiel, it was for defiling God’s name among the nations that God’s breath departed. God restored to life the nation that bore his name so that that same name might be vindicated among the nations.

Moving to the Pentecost story in Acts we find the stage has shifted. In the words of second century Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, “*If the decisive spatial category of Judaism was the Land,*” for Christianity it is “*the world.*” In other words, in Ezekiel and much of the Old Testament, God becomes present in a very particular way within the Promised Land, the Jerusalem Temple, and in God’s people connected to that promise.

But when we come to the story of Pentecost, however, the Lord opens the floodgates that his Spirit might dwell in all persons and that they may be part of his people. Through Pentecost, God shows that his saving acts of creation and redemption are not bound by “the Land” and the Temple, or any fixed patterns of religion. God will be known through his people, the church. And the church will not be a building, nation, or even a pattern of religion. The church will be the particular sanctuary of God’s life-giving Spirit, God’s life-giving Spirit who will time and again confound and amaze the world by turning dry bones into sons and daughters— even you and even me. And so the church is that place God’s Spirit calls home.

In the small town of Treysa, Germany there stands an impressive church. Built nearly 8 centuries ago, it rises from the ground with a gorgeous tower and striking windows in the midst of a simple, unassuming community. However, there is something which is unique about this church. You see, since 1531 this church has only been used for burial services. Not surprisingly, this beautiful church is called the “Death Church.”

Somehow, this doesn’t seem what God had in mind during Pentecost.

I wonder, what does the world know of God from looking at Christ’s church today?

I wonder, what does the world know about God from looking at me and you?

For God is not satisfied with dead things... never has been.