

Restoration through the Spirit

Pentecost Sun. – 05/19/24 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 4 **“Then [Yahweh] said to me, ‘Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, take to heart (obey) the Word of Yahweh’.”**

Introduction

✘ What would you do if you saw a valley full of human skeletons? The Old Testament Reading for Pentecost, though most of us have heard it numerous times – we must admit is quite odd. What do dry bones have to do with the Holy Spirit, which is the main focus for this special Day of Pentecost?

→ Well, it turns out that the key words in this Biblical text are “spirit” and “prophecy”. The word Spirit we’ll have a bit of fun with. And “prophecy” ... well, maybe not “fun” per se, but prophecy in this particular text means to “preach” or “proclaim”.

→ So it is from those dry bones, that we are going to see one of the primary ways that the Holy Spirit works – that is through the preaching of God’s Word to bring about restoration of life.

I. The Spirit comes through preaching.

✘ So first, let’s make sure we understand properly how the Spirit comes to people through preaching.

✘ As we come into this text we see that Ezekiel has a problem: it’s that big pile of bones. Verse two says, “There were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.”

→ The obvious question hanging out there is this: Is what Ezekiel sees real? That’s been debated for centuries among theologians. So I can’t say definitely yes or no. But at the very least, everyone agrees that these bones represented real people – moms and dads; grandpas and grandmas; sons and daughters – people with real stories, real triumphs, real sorrows. It would seem as though all of that had now been brought to nothing. They are very dead.

→ And death is the great equalizer, isn’t it? It doesn’t matter if a person is rich or poor; famous and powerful or unknown and inconsequential in society – they all die. And after that they become dried up bones – all are the same at that point. That’s absolutely real!

✘ This particular text has some fun wordplay in the original Hebrew text that’s lost when it gets translated into English. Games with words; games are fun, right? Well check this out: the word Spirit, “ruach” (רוּחַ) in Hebrew occurs ten times in these 14 verses. But in the English it’s only translated as “Spirit” twice. The other eight times it’s translated as “breath” or “wind.” “Ruach” can mean all of that, all at the same time. So, for the sake of teaching, as I read this text to you moving forward, every time I come across the Hebrew word “ruach” (רוּחַ) , I’m going to read it as “Spirit.”

→ Yahweh’s solution for Ezekiel’s problem – all of those bones in front of him, is that He commands Ezekiel to preach (i.e. “prophecy”) to these bones. Now listen to verses 4–7 again: “Then [Yahweh] said to me, ‘Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of Yahweh. Thus says the Lord Yahweh to these bones: Behold, I will cause [Spirit] to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put [Spirit] in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am Yahweh.’ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.”

→ Now, there's a critical truth for all people of all times declared there in those verses. "O dry bones" (i.e. those who are spiritually dead), "hear the word of Yahweh" (v. 4). The Hebrew word translated as "hear" is "shama" (שמע), which means not only to "hear" something, but much more: "to listen to", "take it to heart" and "obey" what is being proclaimed. And here it's a command proclaimed to dead, spiritually dried up bones.

✘ But when it's God's Word that is being preached, there is a power involved that can't be found with any other words anywhere. What do we see happen here through the preaching of God's Word? The dry bones are put back together, with sinews and flesh and the very Spirit (ruach) of life.

✘ Now today, I look out across the "valley" of this Sanctuary and what do I see? I see a bunch of God's holy people gathered together here on Pentecost, waiting for the Spirit of God to touch your life.

→ The dry bones are all around us. Those made dry and brittle by the sorrows of this life; the sins that warp us, and the years wearing us down. Listen again to verse 11, "Then [Yahweh] said to me, 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off''." The bones are talking!

→ Do you get what that means for you and me today? We're the dry bones! Sin-bleached and spirit-parched in the many ways that we allow our self-focused desires and thoughts and actions to close our ears and our hearts to the life-giving gift of God's powerful Word of truth.

✘ So, Yahweh's advice to Ezekiel is the same to us today. "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear (i.e. take to heart; obey) the Word of Yahweh" (v 4). The public teaching and confession of our faith in the Augsburg Confession for centuries has been this: "To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when He wills, in those who hear the Gospel" (AC V, Kolb-Wengert, 1–2).

→ So if that's what we believe, then what does that mean we should do? Keep showing up to church to hear God's Word. Bring your kids; your grandkids, even if they don't seem to be listening. And if you don't get the sermon, listen to it again on Mt. Calvary's website or you can read it there as well. Give me a call and ask what I meant if you don't understand a certain segment of it. Why? Because God promises you that His Spirit comes into your ears and enters into your very life through preaching.

✘ We see this same thing happen in the Second Reading from the Book of Acts on the Day of Pentecost. Once the Spirit comes with the sound of the rushing wind, the flames of fire and all those foreign languages, what happens next? Almost immediately Peter gets up and he preaches to the crowd. He preaches to the dry bones of those lacking or not yet having faith in Jesus.

II. The Spirit brings restoration.

✘ But what's the big deal about the Spirit? Just look at the amazing things happening here in our Old Testament text. The Spirit brings and restores what was dead back to life! That's a pretty big deal, isn't it?

→ The message of the Christian faith is that God sent His very own Son, Jesus, to this earth to live a perfect life and buy us back from death. I mean, the state of this world is obvious, right? It's broken; lost in self-centered sin and hopelessness. And because of it, we die; we become frail and brittle like these dry bones before Ezekiel.

- But Jesus...He died to pay the penalty required for our sins. And because He is both man and God, He rose again on the third day. That's why Jesus came to this world; to buy it back from sin. And His death and resurrection is a sneak peek of what will happen to us. That death to sin and full restoration back to life that we see in Jesus – that's what we have to look forward to now through faith in Him.
- ✘ So we care about the Holy Spirit because, if Jesus Christ is the blueprint for the restoration of Creation and bringing of eternal life, the Holy Spirit is the builder; the “Do'er”. The Spirit is the One who delivers that promised gift of life; that perfection; that complete restoration in our hearts, minds and souls.
 - Look again at verses 8-10 in our text: “And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on [those bones], and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no [Spirit] in them. Then [Yahweh] said to me, ‘Prophesy to the [Spirit]; prophesy, son of man, and say to the [Spirit], Thus says the Lord Yahweh: Come from the four [Spirit], O [Spirit], and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the [Spirit] came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”
 - ✘ Then in verses 12-14 Yahweh shifts Ezekiel's attention from the valley of dried bones to the actual spirit-parched and faith-depraved souls of the people of Israel; those struggling in the difficulties and misplaced focus of their daily lives, and He directs Ezekiel: “Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord Yahweh: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am Yahweh, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O My people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am Yahweh; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares Yahweh.”
 - ✘ My dear Christians – those who believe; you who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ; you and I are now living in the fulfillment of that promise from God. He has placed His Spirit within us through His Word connected to the water of baptism, and now we are alive!
 - In our Second Reading, we see that the Holy Spirit came to dwell in the hearts of believers on Pentecost. It's then that God established the Spirit's powerful work within His people for the rest of time. Why? so that you and I might be restored; resurrected from dry bones to living, breathing creatures for Christ. That's who we are. It's what I see now as I look at all of you; those who have been miraculously restored and made alive in Jesus.
 - ✘ But the miraculous work doesn't stop here in this place. Maybe you have friends who are on the fence about joining or just checking out a church. Or maybe they're part of a church but they're not really involved – only participating every once in a while.
 - I think the devil tempts us to believe that being involved with the Church – participating in various activities; worshiping here each week; attending Bible studies; doing family devotions in our homes – the devil tempts us to think that these things all turn us from living creatures into dry, dusty, boring, no-fun bones. He wants us to be embarrassed; to believe those who think and tell us, “There's nothing more boring than your local church.”
 - So, for an ever-growing number of young people and adults, where life is “really at” is a Saturday night party, a weekend camping trip, Sunday morning brunch, Netflix or some other streaming service. These, the devil convinces them, are much more entertaining; much more fulfilling than what goes on here every Sunday and throughout the week.
 - ✘ But the Spirit ... He's in the restoration business. Did you notice that Ezekiel has to preach twice to the bones for them to fully come back to life. That's how it is for these bags of bones that we carry around on our feet every day; it takes an entire life of hearing and taking to heart the

preached Word and receiving God's Sacraments to have the Spirit work within us; to finally restore that meat back on our bones, you might say.

→ And after this earthly life ends, the end result that we Christians confess and celebrate is that the Spirit raises us from our tombs; never to be dry bones again.

Conclusion

⌘ This is the great blessing; the reason for celebration here on Pentecost, because we see that as the Spirit keeps on presenting God's preached message of Jesus dying and rising for us, we are restored with new life every day.

→ And other parts of our lives are affected then as well. Those relationships that we thought we might lose are often enabled to become deeper when the Spirit is active within us – both with our biological families and also our brothers and sisters in Christ. The hours that we spend in prayer and in studying God's Word come back to us as a gift, bringing more fulfillment in every aspect of our lives because the Spirit guides our priorities so that our purpose in life makes more sense and gives us more joy.

→ Yes, the Spirit uses the preached Word of God to come to us and breathe new life into us. My life; your life now has meaning; has a firm and eternal direction.

⌘ "O dry bones, hear (take to heart) the word of Yahweh" (v 4). Celebrate God, the Holy Spirit; the One who restored those dry bones; who enlivened the disciples at Pentecost, and who is present here right now, making all things new again! Amen.