

Scriptures

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The Valley of Dry Bones

37 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. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I 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.”

⁷So 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. ⁸I 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. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then 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.’ ¹²Therefore prophecy, 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. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I 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.”

Romans 8:6-11

⁶To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, ⁸and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Sermon: Body and Spirit

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

A valley of dry bones – what a scene of desolation. Sun-baked rock covered in sun-bleached white bones. Light, brittle – crushing into powder under the feet of the old man who wanders back and forth through the valley. Dry bones – not even skeletons, mind you – just a scattering of bones, disconnected from each other. Disorganized, disjointed, dislocated, and Ezekiel, wandering among them, is discombobulated.

Ezekiel is a prophet; his job is to bring God’s word to the people of God. But there are no people here – only bones. This isn’t even a dying people, but a long dead people, so far from life that their remains are no longer scary or horrifying, but only kind of sad.

Why am I here? Ezekiel must have wondered. Of what use is a prophet if there are no ears to hear?

‘Mortal,’ comes the voice from heaven. Mortal – you who are subject to death. You who will one day be no more than these dry bones.

‘Mortal, can these bones live?’ asks YHWH. Can these scattered bones, dried and desiccated, ready to crumble into dust at a touch, can they live again? I wonder what Ezekiel really wanted to say at that point. I wonder what words were in his head as he gazed about him at the arid, hot, sterilized landscape.

‘Only you know, Lord.’ he finally mutters. Quite a wise answer, as it turns out. Ezekiel realizes there is no hope for these bones other than God, that much is sure. Only the God who created the world and all that is in it, who created nations from an old childless couple in Haran; the God who later freed those people from the living death of slavery in Egypt, who raised up judges and kings and prophets, calling his people to life again and again while they continually chose death – only that God can possibly know if there is any hope for these old bones.

Often, in order to explore and try to understand a text it is useful for us to try to place ourselves in the story, to try to take the place of one of the characters and see through their eyes, to walk a mile in their shoes.

We can begin with Ezekiel. Ezekiel is an obedient servant of God. He goes where God tells him, he says the things that God asks him to say. It’s not an easy life; it’s a lonely life – a life on the road. Ezekiel is not always well received, nor are his words always welcomed. But Ezekiel is faithful, and he draws strength from being in the presence of the Holy One. In this story Ezekiel faced with a new task – the monumentally hopeless task of preaching life to those who cannot hear. He has preached to the resistance before, and the unwilling. But not the dead. Ezekiel is the only living being present in that valley, and under that heat he won’t be living for long.

Have you been there before? Doing something that appears pointless, with no chance of success, that sucks the life right out of you? Like Sisyphus continually rolling his boulder up the hill? Maybe it’s a job – maybe even your family. To varying degrees, we have all had experiences where we feel like Ezekiel at the start of this story, where we are ministering, loving, giving our very lives to something or someone who is not capable of understanding, appreciating, nor even accepting what we are trying so desperately to give.

Being poured out like that certainly is a valley of dry bones experience. If this continues for too long, we can become the bones themselves. Once we are exhausted and depleted by our efforts towards those who are unresponsive and unreceptive, we too will fall, to become bleached and brittle under the unrelenting sun. Remember, God began with Ezekiel by calling him mortal – reminding Ezekiel that as he looked out upon the bones scattered on the ground that he was looking at his own future.

I suspect that we’ve all lived through times such as this. The long dark night of the soul is a familiar image to most of us. Most of us can point to periods in our lives when doubts, hopelessness, depression, fear and anxiety were prominent in our daily living. Perhaps some of us are in that place right now. We’re either like Ezekiel – the living hopelessly serving the long dead - or we’ve progressed beyond that point and have, ourselves, become dead inside.

This is quite extreme, and though most of us can identify with Ezekiel’s position, or even that of the dry bones, few of us stay in that place for very long. We can’t, because that valley is hostile to life.

The story continues: as Ezekiel began to prophesy there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. Ezekiel looked, and there were sinews on them; flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them - but there was no breath in them.

They looked like people. They were no longer scattered bones – remnants of life – but they were complete with flesh, and sinews, and even skin. On the outside they looked like real human beings, but they had no life in them. There was a great noise and lots of movement, but noise and movement do not equal life.

They had no breath in them – no spirit. This idea of breath is one of the first things we learn in the bible. Genesis 2:7 – ‘then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.’

In both the Genesis and Ezekiel passages, there is first a body – the physical life, *sarx* - and secondly comes the breath of God, the spiritual life, *zoe*. This same order is revealed to us by Jesus as he speaks with Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus, ‘Unless one is born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.’ Of course Nicodemus is confused by this, asking ‘How can a man be born when he is old? He cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb and be born, can he?’ Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. 6 That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’

We’ve imagined being Ezekiel, and we’ve imagined being the dry bones, now let’s enter into this story as the bodies with no breath. I suspect that this is a much more common condition, indeed, much or most of the world lives in this state. Bones, muscles, skin – but no breath of God. Flesh, but no spirit.

How important is the breath of God, the spiritual birth, to us? Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin. As such he was a respected member of the community, a leader – and like most people with a high social standing, was likely also a man with wealth. In fact, he was exactly what our society values – a person with means and respect. One would think that he is doing very well, living in the flesh. Yet Jesus tells him that he is incomplete. He has been born of the flesh, but does not yet have spiritual life. Remember – noise and movement do not equal life. It is the breath, the spirit, that gives life. If Nicodemus seemed to be doing alright just being born of the flesh, then what is this spiritual life, and why do we need it?

Those who live without the Spirit of God are limited. Without the Spirit, we remain as fleshly beings only. We are stuck in our bodies. This leads to a small life, often characterized by selfishness and appetites. If flesh is all we have, it is all we are able to think about. My body, my food, my house, my career, my family. I suspect that most of us spend a good deal of time living in this manner. We have our Ezekiel periods, but likely the characters in the story that we can most easily identify with are these meat creatures.

But it goes further than having small lives now; lives limited in scope and focus while here on earth. Living only in the flesh means that we must die when our flesh dies. Those who live in the flesh, will die in the flesh. It is the spirit of God that allows us to transcend our bodies – when we have the spirit of God we realize we are more than meat and we learn to find communion within the Godhead. ‘If Christ is in you,’ Paul writes, ‘though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.’

When we embrace the spirit, we embrace the divine, the infinite; indeed, God’s enveloping embrace welcomes us in to become part of the divine, to live in him.

We need both body and spirit to have a complete life. This two-part existence of body and spirit is seen in both the beginning and the end of the reading. At the start ‘the hand (body) 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 filled with dry bones.’

At the end, God says ‘I will bring you up from your graves; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. I will put my spirit within you, you shall live, then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act.’ There is physical movement and regeneration, which is body, then the inspiration of the spirit, followed by knowledge of the Lord.

Even in the middle of the story, in verse 6, God says ‘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.’ Body, breath and Spirit, and finally knowledge of God. There is a recurring sequence here.

By the end of the story, we find good news for Ezekiel as he has experienced success in his obedience. He prophesied, as instructed, and called the breath of God from the four corners of the world, and the people have been restored to

life. This, of course, means that things have turned out well for the bones, and for those halfway stage bodies – the bodies of flesh that lacked spirit. We can be encouraged by this. The end of the story is regeneration and restoration – life given by and lived in God.

Of course, we don't know how long this process took. Nothing in the text indicates how long Ezekiel prophesied – it could have been minutes, days, months or even years. If any of you are feeling as though you are in a valley of dry bones, I won't promise you a quick fix and that everything will be ok tomorrow. But we do know the end result; the end result is life – not just physical life, but also spiritual life, with a knowledge of God.

In the end, the sinners are returned to Eden, the slaves set free and restored to the promised land, the exiles return to the land of their fathers, the prodigal son restored to his position and Lazarus returned to his family.

This is our story. Each of us has been separated from God and we are seeking a way to return, whether we are aware of this or not. Augustine expresses this in his confession of the restless heart that he declares will find rest only when it returns to God. Separation is certainly the unrequited longing that is expressed in Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones.

We will all experience separation from God in varying degrees throughout our lives under the sun. At times the separation is small as we bask in God's presence. Other seasons we wander in the valley of dry bones. Our place, however, is to dwell fully and finally in the presence of our creator, where the dry valley will be transformed into the lush garden, and we will, at last, find peace from our labours and troubles.

Amen.