

Ezekiel 37:1-14 - The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. ³ He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O Sovereign LORD, you alone know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!' ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.' "

⁷ So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.' " ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.' ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.' "

The Spirit Gives Life

The LORD's right hand is lifted high; the LORD's right hand has done mighty things! I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.

(Psalm 118:16-17)

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said. "But Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days." Or, as the King James Version beautifully renders it, "Lord, by this time, he stinketh." Death and decay confronted the Resurrection and the Life. Still, the Author of Life calls to the dead man, "Lazarus, come out!" And the impossible happens – the dead man walks out of his tomb alive. This wasn't the only time in Jesus' ministry when he had something to say in the face of death. Who can forget the scene of the two parades silently slipping past each other – the one coming down the hill from that town of Nain, led by a widow who was about to bury the second man in her life, her son; the other headed up by Jesus himself. He stops. He puts his hand on the casket, and with one sentence changes everything. "Young man, I say to you, get up!" And the impossible happens – the dead man comes back to life. And of course, every parent in this room dreads the thought of feeling the pain of Jairus, who begged Jesus to come and lay his hands on his sick little daughter. But it didn't happen soon enough – a delayed departure led to a dead daughter. It was too late for that little girl...but then, Jesus showed up. "Talitha koum!" And the impossible happens – the dead girl comes back to life. Every experience we've ever had would lead us to a pretty rock solid conclusion – death is a one way street; nobody comes back. From the first shovel full of fresh graveyard dirt to the one sided conversations with a tombstone for years to come, it's a fool's errand to try to talk down death. It just doesn't work! But that's not God's way of doing things.

So how do you think the prophet Ezekiel felt? Standing ankle deep in a valley of bones with a call to preach? The Lord had called this prophet to do some strange sounding things in the past, too. God once told Ezekiel to draw the city of Jerusalem on a clay tablet, and then build little camps and battering rams around it – almost like playing with toy soldiers – to show that Jerusalem would be overtaken and overrun. Next, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days and then lie on his right side for 40 days – to show that Israel and Judah's sin had not gone unnoticed by a holy God. Then, God had Ezekiel shave his entire head and beard, and throw one third of his hair into the fire, take one third of his hair and strike it with a sword, and cast the final third to the wind – all to teach that these rebellious people would be destroyed, pursued with the sword, and scattered to the winds. All those vivid lessons about what damage their sin would do, the people ignored. They were taken into captivity. Jerusalem was overtaken and overrun. And now, sitting in exile in Babylon, they hear the worst news of all – the temple had been destroyed. So, there they sat - abandoned and alone. In other words, to borrow a phrase, Israel stinketh. What could they say? **Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are cut off.** What hope could there possibly be for them?

This is where we meet the prophet Ezekiel in our Old Testament lesson for today. God had called his prophet to do some strange things in the past, but this one took the cake. **The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones...bones that were very dry.** Strange, no? The Lord brings his prophet to a valley; not a valley with amber waves of grain, but a valley strewn with bones. What Ezekiel saw before him was death – unvarnished, unmistakable, irreversible death. These weren't fresh corpses recently fallen in battle. No, these were sun bleached brittle old bones. As the Lord took his prophet on this tour of 'death valley,' the point became clear. These very dead, very dry bones had something in common with Israel – they were cut off from their life source. They had forsaken their Lord, ignored his word, and now they were feeling his discipline. The whole promised people appeared as helpless as a valley full of dead, dry bones – but the Lord had other plans. **He asked me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "O**

Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!...I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin.’” Even stranger, no? The Lord calls on his prophet to preach, **Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!** but there wasn’t an ear among them! What’s the use?

Have you ever felt that way? *What’s the use?!* Have you ever felt like captive Israel, crying out, **Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone. We are cut off?** When you look at your life and you come to the conclusion that nothing is as it should be – when it’s your health that’s changed from prime to problem; when it’s your chosen career that you thought would be more of a path to success and less of a brick wall. **Our bones are dried up**, when it’s my family that’s so messed up, I’m ashamed even to talk about it. **Our hope is gone**, when the only happiness that remains in my marriage is what’s captured in those pictures on the wall. **We are cut off**, when my loneliness is crippling, and I don’t feel like I’ve got a friend in the world. Have you ever felt like that? When you look at your life and come to the conclusion that nothing is as it should be? Have you ever felt that way when you look at your relationship with God? **My bones are dried up**, when I look in the mirror and I find myself wishing that last night was just a bad dream. **My hope is gone**, because I did it again – you know, the sin I promised I’d never come close to. **I’m cut off**, because maybe, just maybe, this time I’ve out-sinned God’s grace. After all, what would he ever want with me, this dead, dry bag of bones? *What’s the use?* To borrow a phrase, because of sin: I stinketh, and so do you. Have you ever felt like your life and your faith are about as useless as preaching to a valley full of dead bones? Well, good thing you’ve got a God who only creates from nothing!

Ezekiel said, **So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.** You can hear the song, can’t you? Foot bone to ankle bone, ankle bone to shin bone, shin bone to knee bone – all the way up the line! What a miracle – form bones to bodies, beautiful and fully formed, but **there was no breath in them.** They were lifeless. They looked the part, but apart from God and the gift of his Holy Spirit working through his Word, they would remain lifeless. That’s what happens when we search for solutions in ourselves instead of Scripture. Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, we’re cut off – but if I just apply the right principles, if I just take the right steps, if I only commit harder than I’ve ever committed before, then things will start looking up. But those self-made solutions stinketh! They’ll only leave us looking polished and put together on the outside, but dead on the inside. Only One can bring life from death. **“This is what the Sovereign LORD says; Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.”** And what happened? **Breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet.** After sending his prophet Ezekiel to warn of doom, gloom, and destruction, the Lord proclaims a new message – a message of life. He would restore his people, and bring them back to their homeland. The life-giving Spirit of God accompanied the preaching of his Word, calling out into a void incapable of responding, and created life where there was only death.

This is the message of Pentecost. Into a world enslaved to sin and death, the Lord Jesus sent his apostles with a message that brings life from death. Into a planet-earth-sized valley of dry bones, the Lord of the Church speaks his gospel promise through his messengers. This Jesus, whom you crucified, God has raised to life. This Jesus has paid for your sin and defeated your death – giving you the sure hope of life forever in heaven and a reason to exist right now. Talk about a life-giving message! The work of the Holy Spirit didn’t end in Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones and it didn’t stop with Peter’s powerful Pentecost preaching. The same live-giving Holy Spirit of God that accompanied Ezekiel’s and Peter’s preaching is living and active today. Through the preaching of his Word, calling out into a void incapable of responding, the Holy Spirit creates life where there was only death. It happens at an unimpressive font – eighteen words and three splashes of water. And what happens? The Holy Spirit

works – connecting us to Christ’s death and resurrection. Because he lives, we live. The Holy Spirit still creates life where there was only death. It happens in a wafer of bread and a sip of wine, as Jesus gives you his body and blood given and shed for you. The Holy Spirit still creates life where there was only death. It happens through this cracked clay standing before you. *As a called servant of Christ, and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins.*

The Spirit gives life. What a powerful Pentecost promise to cherish on Confirmation Sunday! At this point, I could just address our two confirmands, but I want all of us to remember this beautiful promise. The Holy Spirit gives life, and he does it through the Word and Sacraments. Every time you hear your Savior’s voice in the good news of the gospel; every time you pass by the font and remember what happened there and you proclaim, “I am baptized into Christ;” every time you stand shoulder to shoulder with these fellow sinner/saints and taste and see your forgiveness, the Holy Spirit is giving life. So don’t sever that lifeline. Rejoice in every opportunity to hear and receive all the good things God has done for you in Christ. Sure, you’ll get older. Things will change, life will get busy. And, the promises you make today will be a challenge. *Do you intend to continue steadfast in this teaching and even die rather than fall away? That’s not nothing! Do you intend to remain faithful to God as long as you live?* To those questions, you’ll answer, *Yes, as God gives me strength* – so don’t forget...he’s going to do just that. **Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live...Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.** The Lord who brings life from death promises his help, and he’s not going to stop.

If you haven’t yet, someday you may be tempted to think like the Israelites of Ezekiel’s day. **Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.** When that day comes, remember the power and promise of the Holy Spirit working through the Word and Sacraments. We’re not dried up – we’ve been washed in the Spirit’s saving flood. Our hope isn’t gone – instead our hope is a person, once dead and alive again, for you. Cut off? Hardly! Listen to your Savior’s promise that nothing can snatch you from his loving embrace. This Pentecost Sunday, this Confirmation Sunday, and every day until Jesus returns, rejoice that the Holy Spirit gives life, and that he’s given it even to you!

Amen

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

(Jude 24-25)