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St. Paul's Lutheran Church
2100 16th Street SW
Austin, MN 55912-1749
Pastor Ted Barthels
Sermon preached on
April 2, 2017
5th Sunday in Lent

Scripture Lessons: Romans 8:11-19, Passion: Before Herod & Pilate

Hymns: 155; 358; 151; 151:7

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Sermon Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it *was* full of bones. ²Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, *there were* very many in the open valley; and indeed *they were* very dry. ³And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?"

So I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know."

⁴Again He said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. ⁶I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD.'"

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. ⁸Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but *there was* no breath in them.

⁹Also He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.'"

¹⁰So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came

into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

¹¹ Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. ¹³ Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. ¹⁴ I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken *it* and performed *it*,” says the LORD.’” (NKJV)

This is the Word of God.

Sanctify us, oh Lord, through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

In Christ Jesus, who died for us and rose again, dear fellow Redeemed:

INTRO: “God Would Never ...”

For years, even in captivity, the people of Judah clung tightly to a false hope that was based on their physical identity. It went like this, “We are the children of Abraham: God would never destroy us. God would never destroy Jerusalem. God would never destroy the temple Solomon had built.” During this time they maintained their hypocrisy. They didn’t see anything wrong with conforming to the world and its religious philosophy as long as they went through the motions of observing worship to God as well. They slipped into impenitence and apostasy, unbelief. God had not only warned them, He warned them repeatedly with patient endurance that their sin would bring judgment and destruction. Instead of repentance, even after many were taken into captivity, the Prophet Ezekiel along with them, their response remained, “God would never...”

People today still cling to false hope by mischaracterizing God and diminishing His attribute of Divine Justice. “God would never send

people to hell,” they say. Meanwhile the Word of the Lord is not only neglected and ignored, but ridiculed. Those who believe are often characterized as bigoted, ignorant, and superstitious, denying science. Many self-proclaimed Christians today think, “God would never take His truth away from us. God would never forsake our nation. God would never...” while the churches to which they belong continue to embrace sin and the false gods of this world as being wonderful expressions of love, speeding the sinner down the path to destruction,. They are blind leading the blind. People slip deeper and deeper into impenitence and apostasy.

But then, in the days of Ezekiel the news was received among the captives in Babylon: God did! Jerusalem was destroyed! Its citizens killed or captured. The temple, that beautiful, beautiful temple was looted and razed. Nothing was left. The foundation of their false hope evaporated. The Jews in captivity fell into despair. As a people they were lost, dead, without hope in the world. They were nothing more than a field of dry bones.

At that point the Lord changed Ezekiel’s message, that the people of the Jews might have hope, true hope in the Lord and His promises.

THEME: God Makes Dry Bones Live!

It took a lot before the Jews in captivity came to the desperate conclusion that they were lost and without hope; that they were nothing more than what the Lord depicted in this spectacular vision revealed to Ezekiel:

I. Nothing but Dry Bones.

Ezekiel 37:1-2, 11 “The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it *was* full of bones. ² Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, *there were* very many in the open valley; and indeed *they were* very dry. ... ¹¹ Then He said to me, ‘Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, “Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!”’”

This is the hopelessness that sin brought into the world. This is the hopelessness of unbelief of a different sort than the Jews had maintained in their impenitence for their idolatry. They were in the throes of despair! And indeed they were right to despair as long as that despair was to despair of their own righteousness. When one is burdened with sin and guilt the spiritual state of that individual is desperate and as dry as any old bones can be.

This is what David confessed of his own spiritual state when he tried to hide his sin and guilt from God and the world. We read in

Psalms 32:3-4 “When I kept silent, my bones grew old
Through my groaning all the day long.
⁴For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer.

What David found true for his soul, what the Jews found true for their souls, is the truth for any yet today who are led down the path of sin. In our epistle lesson we read; “**For if you live according to the flesh you will die**” (Romans 8:13). Paul also teaches us of man’s natural state, “**you were dead in trespasses and sins**” (Ephesians 2:1b).

Dry bones are about as dead as dead can be, and without the Lord that is the spiritual state of all mankind. What we are brought to realize through this amazing vision is –

II. The Revitalizing Power of the Holy Spirit.

Consider the Lord’s question to Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 37:3- 10 And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” So I answered, “O Lord GOD, You know.” ⁴Again He said to me, “Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. ⁶I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I *am* the LORD.”””

⁷So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together,

bone to bone. ⁸ Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but *there was no breath in them.*

⁹ Also He said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’”” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.”

From man’s perspective nothing could be more certain than the state of dry bones. One might anticipate that Ezekiel would answer the Lord’s question in the negative quite quickly. However, Ezekiel had learned a great deal as the Lord’s prophet. He deferred to the authority of the Lord, saying “Lord GOD, You know.” With God all things are possible, even that which appears obviously impossible to man. The Lord who has made all things has done the impossible many times over. The Lord makes the impossible possible.

In this vision the Lord would demonstrate the revitalizing power of the Holy Spirit. He has Ezekiel preach to a field full of dry bones. The Spirit works through the Word that is proclaimed through the Lord’s messengers. As Ezekiel proclaimed the message the Lord had given him to proclaim, immediately amazing things began to happen as the bones came together and first sinews and then flesh appeared. However there was still no life within these newly reformed bodies. That is when the Lord called upon Ezekiel to preach to the wind to come and enter as breath into these bodies. The Hebrew words for breath is the same as the word for spirit. The vision is leading us to appreciate the real life giving power of the Holy Spirit, and how the Holy Spirit does not work apart from the Word of God. When Ezekiel proclaimed the Word of the Lord breath entered into the bodies and they were once again alive.

What an amazing and encouraging lesson this vision provided for Ezekiel for his challenging ministry in which he had felt largely ignored. What an amazing and important and encouraging lesson this vision continues to provide for us in our ministry in America and throughout the world today. The world is full of spiritual dry bones. Too many are very much like the Jews of Ezekiel’s day. Too many are Christians who have only gone through the motions

while they also dabbled in the philosophy and false schemes of idolatrous religions. Too many have been blessed with the knowledge of the truth only to let it slip away as they slipped into apostasy. The end result is spiritual dry bones, and the Lord has called us to preach to dry bones. Can they live? Our answer must be the same as Ezekiel's, "Lord, you know!" If we obey the Lord's command and preach the Word the Lord has delivered to us we will witness the revitalizing power of the Holy Spirit for ourselves.

The Lord has commissioned us to "go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved, He who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:16) The power of the Spirit works through that message of Christ crucified. In this Lenten season we focus on the sufferings of our Lord, sufferings He willingly endured in our place to pay our debt, to redeem us to God. As we share that good news of God's love and forgiveness the Spirit of our God will go to work on the spiritual dry bones that fill the world before us and the impossible will happen. The Spirit of our God will not only bring those dry bones together and restore flesh to dry bones, the Spirit of God will breath into those inert spiritual bodies the breath of life. It all happens as the Spirit works through the Word, for the gospel remains the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Yes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek for therein the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, the just shall live by faith!" (Romans 1:15-16).

What the Lord wanted Ezekiel and also the Jews in captivity to comprehend was that the

III. The Saving Will God prevails.

The will of God to save prevails in this evil world in spite of all the evil that we see, in spite of our erroneous evaluation that the spiritual state of our nation and even that of the world is hopeless. God declared otherwise for the Jews in the Babylonian captivity, and He declares otherwise for us in America in the 21st century as well.

This begins with the repentant child of God finding joy and peace in the gospel. We recall David's response to God's grace:

Psalm 51:8 “Make me hear joy and gladness, *That* the bones You have broken may rejoice.”

The bones which the Lord has broken as He chastises us and corrects us in this life find joy and gladness as we hear of God’s forgiveness in Christ Jesus who died for us and rose again. We have joy and gladness that fill our hearts to overflowing so that we share this hope of forgiveness, life, and salvation with others even as the Spirit caused David to share it with us. This is our foundation of faith that God desires for the salvation of a fallen mankind prevails. That was the foundation of Ezekiel’s message. The Jews would be delivered from captivity and restored in the land of Israel and the Savior promised to the patriarchs would be born in that land from this people. God’s plan for the salvation of sinners would be fulfilled according to His Word.

And so it has all come to pass. Not only was Jesus born in Bethlehem of Judea, born of the virgin Mary, but He also suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. The third day He rose again, and life and salvation was secured for a fallen world. You know that truth in your hearts. You possess faith in Jesus because the Spirit of our God has created that faith, and with that faith new spiritual life within you.

The saving will of God prevailed in spite of the enemies of Jesus, in spite of the evil in this world, in spite of the hardness of our own hearts. The saving will of God will continue to prevail, for it is **God who makes dry bones live!**

AMEN.

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Amen. (Romans15:13)