

March 26, 2023 – Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:1-45

There's a story I once heard about my grandfather. You see, his family was all German-American. Not real recent immigrants or anything. But definitely very German. And he had heard German spoken among his relatives as a small child, but he really didn't speak it.

And he was kind of a handy man. Officially a high school shop teacher, but he did a lot of work on the side. And he was helping some friends who were, in fact, recent German immigrants with some rewiring in their house. So he's in their attic working and their son, a young boy who didn't know a word of English, comes up to see what he's doing.

And before my grandfather knows what's happening, the boy has reached out and is about to grab hold of an exposed, live electrical wire. And my grandfather panics, because he knows he can't get to him in time and he knows the boy doesn't speak English. And in a miraculous flash of recollection, he shouts out, "Nein! Das ist heis!"

"No. That's hot." It works. The boy looks up, startled and afraid, and backs away from the wires. All it took was a few of the right words in the right language at the right time. And he quite possibly saved a boy's life.

Words are powerful. They can punish and heal. Condemn and save. And that's especially true when we're talking about God's Word. Because God's Word is more than just its own book. It's even more than just its own language. God's Word is alive.

Hebrews 4 tells us that. *"For the Word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight..."* Not from 'its' sight. 'His' sight. The Word of God is a person. And the text says, *"...all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account."*

This isn't just hyperbole. This isn't just symbolism. St John tells us the same thing. He tells us exactly who the Word of God is. For, *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth."*

This book that we call the Bible is more than just a book. It is God speaking to us. It is Christ himself speaking to us. And, in many cases, crying out, "Nein! Das ist heis!" No, that's hot. No, don't touch that. No, don't even go near that. No, that's sinful. That will kill you.

And as much as we may claim faith in that idea, I wonder how much impact it has on our lives. If the voice of God bellowed out of heaven and declared, "Joshua! You will not bear false witness against your neighbor!" I wonder if I would react like that boy in the attic. Jump up and back away from the critical words I was about to speak about someone behind their back. The rumor I was about to spread that I had no business repeating.

Think about it for yourselves. Would the audible voice of God, commanding you not to break his law make you less prone to break it? Probably, I would think, for a while. Then why doesn't God do that all the time? If that would eliminate sin, wouldn't it be a good thing?

Well, the problem is that I suspect it would only be for a while. And then we'd eventually tune it out. And then God would have to use an air horn to get our attention. And then we'd tune it out. And then he'd get flashing lights and sirens. And we'd tune those out. And then he'd slap us upside the head, which I'm firmly convinced he does even now. But eventually we'd tune that out too.

As Jesus once said in a parable, we have the Law and the Prophets. If that's not good enough for us, then even the most dramatic sights, sounds, and experiences won't get our attention for very long. The Word of God alone should be sufficient for us.

And it is. But not because we know it. Or because we pay attention to it. Or because we obey it. But because the Word of God is living and active. And its activity is not simply to punish and condemn. But also to heal and save.

We see it in our Old Testament lesson. *“Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.”* And so Ezekiel prophesied as he was commanded. And as he spoke he heard the bones rattling. Coming together, bone to bone. With tendons and flesh and skin and finally breath.

A valley of dry bones. Bones long since dead and gone. Bones beyond saving. Brought back to life by the Word of God alone. It was the Word of God that brought life to creation in the beginning. It is the Word of God spoken to these bones that brings them back to life. The Word of God is alive. And it brings life.

We see it in our Gospel lesson too. Jesus goes to the funeral of his good friend Lazarus. Lazarus has been dead for four days. He’s not mostly dead. He’s completely dead. He’s not merely dead. He is really most sincerely dead.

And yet Jesus walks up to his tomb. He orders the stone rolled away. He prays. And then he calls out with a loud voice, *“Lazarus, come out.”* No mud on the eyes this time, like we heard last week. No, special touch on the coffin, like the widow of Nain's son. Nothing that could be perceived as a magic act of any kind. Just a word from the Word made flesh. And Lazarus walks out alive and well.

The Word punishes. The Word condemns. But the Word also heals. And the Word also saves. It saves because it is God himself at work. And so every time we hear the Word of God, we're hearing the voice of God bringing new life to us.

And that's why reading and hearing the Word of God regularly is so important. Because it's not just about learning something new. It's about being brought back to life by the Spirit of God.

That's what Paul is talking about in our Epistle Lesson. *“To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.”* To set your mind on the flesh, to set it on worldly things, is to look at a valley of dry bones and see only that: dry bones. It's to look at the tomb of Lazarus, dead for four days, and think: he's so dead he probably stinks by now, like Martha did.

To set your mind on the Spirit, to set it on the Word of God, is to look at a valley of dry bones and see an exceedingly great army waiting to be raised from the dead. It's to look at the tomb of Lazarus, dead for four days, and say: oh, he's only sleeping, and Jesus will wake him one day. To set your mind on the Word of God is to look at the entire world in a different way.

When the Word of God is within you then the Word made flesh is within you. And if the Word made flesh is within you then the Spirit of God is within you. Teaching you the things of God. Teaching you to submit to God's Law. Teaching you to live by the Spirit. Teaching you to see the whole world through God's eyes.

Most of all, teaching you that if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies. In other words, every time we look at Jesus' death and resurrection in the Word, we see the promise of our own death and resurrection.

And that makes the world a completely different place. It makes this valley of dry bones that we live in a place of life and hope. Hope that though we die, yet shall we live. That if we believe in Christ we will live and never die. That weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning.

The Word is powerful. It can punish. And it can condemn. And you cannot escape it and you cannot tune it out forever. Because the Word will have the last word. But thanks be to God, that last word is also a word to us. The right word in the right language at the right time. Alive or dead. Even long gone in our graves.

And it is a word of hope. A word of life. A word that calls us by name to come out of our graves and live again. Amen.