

April 2, 2017 – Ezekiel 37:1-14 & John 11:1-53

Today's Old Testament lesson is one of my favorite stories from the Bible. There are many good reasons to love this story, but I think, for me, it's just because it's so vivid. So intense. So cinematic, in a way.

I mean, come on: it's essentially the creation of a zombie army. What's not to love about that? You'd think Hollywood would have turned it into a movie, by now. They've butchered every other Bible story.

OK, so maybe that's not exactly what's going on here. But it is a pretty bizarre scene unfolding, told in great detail. And a pretty important one too. Definitely something we should take some time to look into. Ezekiel starts off by saying:

*“The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me around among them, and behold, there were very many on the surface of the valley, and behold, they were very dry.”*

A valley full of bones. Human bones, as we'll later learn. The bones of a huge army. Which means this is most likely the site of a great battle. Which makes sense. Battles often took place in valleys.

Two armies would meet on opposite sides of the valley. Each taking their own high ground. They would face off, neither attacking. How could they? If either attempted to attack, they would be slaughtered. The army on the opposite ridge would rain down arrows. Killing them all before they ever made it to the other side.

No, instead, the two commanders would meet in the middle. They would agree to a time for battle. And then, when that time came, each side would slowly move down into the valley. Watching their opponent. Making sure they kept their end of the agreement. And as they approached the bottom, they would pick up speed. Rushing headlong into the fray. Where there would be a great clash of swords and spears.

The two sides would fight until one side gained ground on the other. And then a retreat would be called. The losing side would race up the hill. The archers would let loose a volley of arrows. Both sides would separate and go back to their high ground.

Night would fall and the two commanders would meet again. This time not to discuss war, but peace. Temporary peace. A ceasefire so that each side could collect their dead. Bury them. Burn them. Whatever their religion dictated. The dead would be cleared from the battlefield. Morning would come. And the whole thing would start all over again. Until, finally, a victor emerged.

This was the common formula for warfare. Not just in the Middle East, but throughout the world. Except, that's not exactly what's happened here. The two sides have met in battle, yes. But the bodies have not been buried. They're left scattered on the ground. Food for vultures and dogs until they're nothing but dry bones.

Why? Most likely, because there's no one left to bury them. The one army has defeated the other army so swiftly, so completely, that there's simply no one left. And the bodies are left to rot in disgrace at their utter defeat.

That's what Ezekiel is seeing. And it has to feel pretty familiar to him. Because he's seeing this while he is in Babylonian exile. And this is exactly what happened to his own countrymen. First when the Assyrians came for his countrymen in the north. And then later, when the Babylonians came for his countrymen in the south. The Israelite army was massacred. And its people carried off as slaves and exiles.

But it's probably familiar to him for another reason. Because Ezekiel is a prophet and a pastor. And the things that God shows him are usually symbols – parables – of a deeper spiritual meaning. And this physical death that's all around him looks just like the spiritual death that has overtaken his people.

The Israelites are spiritually dead. They have succumbed to every sinful desire. They have forsaken their God. And it has been this way for so long, they're not even rotting corpses anymore. They are bones. Very dry bones.

And so God asks Ezekiel, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Is there any hope for my people? Any chance for life and faith and righteousness to return to Israel? And Ezekiel has kind of a funny response. “O Lord God, you know.” In other words, “I'm not sure, but I think you're gonna tell me.”

And so God says, “Prophesy over these bones.” Prophesy to them. The common American understanding of “prophesy” is roughly equivalent to fortune-telling. But not in the Bible. When the Bible talks about prophesy, it means delivering a message from God. And so God is telling Ezekiel, “Preach to these bones.” Preach to your people. Deliver a message from me to them.

And what is the message? *“Behold, I will cause breath 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 breath in you, and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord.”*

Ezekiel does what he's told. Twice in fact. The first time he preaches, flesh and skin appear on the bones. But there's no life in them. They're simply dead bodies once again. So Ezekiel preaches again, this time asking for God to breath into these corpses and bring life into them. Just as God once breathed into Adam and brought life into him. And the winds stir. And the bodies come alive. They stand up, a great army once again.

God has given Ezekiel hope. Hope that even a nation long dead in its sin can live once again. That God can raise even dry bones – physical and spiritual – back to life. And make them a great army to march victorious into His promised land.

But, you'll notice, that hope isn't for the people of Ezekiel's day. It's a prophecy of things to come. God says, *“And you shall know that I am the Lord, 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 the Lord; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.”*

When you see people rising from the dead, then you will know that this is taking place. When you see a man dead 4 days in the grave. So dead that his tomb has been sealed. So dead that his body has begun to stink with decomposition. When you see that man walk out of his grave. Then you will know that the Lord is with you.

Then you will know that God's Spirit has come to you. And that God is bringing new flesh to your dry bones. That God is breathing his very life into you that you may live. That you may stand up, a great army for the Lord. As he leads you into your own land.

The Pharisees of Jesus' day missed it entirely. They saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead and it turned them against him. *“If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him.”* Well... yeah. Maybe you should take the hint. *“The Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation.”* Well... yeah. But maybe God has something better for his people than a sliver of land in the Middle East.

But, ironically, perhaps Caiaphas said it best. *“It is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish.”* Truer words were never spoken. It is better. What Caiaphas didn't realize, however, was that the nation had already perished. They were the dry bones. We were the dry bones. Dead in our sin. Until Jesus brought his Spirit into our hearts. And breathed new life into us.

And we will once again be that valley of dry bones. What is this earth in God's eyes, after all, except one giant graveyard. A valley of dry bones. An army conquered by sin. Conquered, really, without even putting up a fight.

But we are also an army that has heard his Word. We are an army brought to new life in his Spirit. We are an army waiting to hear the voice of Jesus call us out of the grave. For he is the resurrection and the life. In his death, we have life. And in his rising, we see our own resurrection. For like Lazarus, whoever believes in him, though he die, yet shall he live.

*“I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live... I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the Lord.” Amen.*