

“CHURCH RENEWAL”

Ezekiel 37:1-14 (p. 840)

On the day of Pentecost, as we commemorate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the early Church, it seems appropriate that we consider the prophet Ezekiel, a man whose eccentric behavior was rivaled by his weird experiences with the Lord. But before we take a closer look at this strange incident we just heard recounted, let's review the historical background.

Ezekiel was born in 621 BC – about 100 years after the prophet Micah (from whom you heard last week) preached his sharply critical message in Israel. When Ezekiel was 25 years old, around 597 BC, he and his family were carried off into exile to Babylon, along with all of the “important people” of Judah. It was a bitter time for the Jews. And to compound the problem of being exiled, news from Jerusalem was slow in reaching Babylon, and it was usually bad news.

Now, Ezekiel had been called to be a prophet – to speak for God. That's a hard job in hard times. The burden of his message was: “*Well, we're just getting what we deserve.*” And he never let up. So you can understand how, for a long time, Ezekiel was ridiculed and rejected by his own people. He was the sort of preacher from whom no one wants to hear, not even in bad times. These Jews in Babylon desperately wanted to believe that this nightmare would soon be over; that they would be able to return to their homes and resume life as usual.

Things might have gone on this way indefinitely. But then one day an exhausted messenger arrived from Jerusalem with this devastatingly simple message: “*The city has fallen!*” Their beloved Jerusalem had been destroyed, along with all their dreams. The very thing that Ezekiel had been predicting all along was now confirmed. Interestingly, Ezekiel suddenly found himself enjoying great credibility. The people started flocking to hear him preach. This “wet blanket” whom almost everyone had been ignoring or discounting became a kind of overnight success.

I think there's an important lesson here for leaders (religious and otherwise). Any time you enjoy a surge of popularity, you would be wise to ask yourself, “*What's going on here? Why this sudden interest in what I have to say?*” And that's exactly what the Lord made Ezekiel do. God made him take a long hard look at his popularity as a preacher. Near the end of Chapter 33, God had said this to Ezekiel:

“*As for you, son of man, your countrymen are talking together about you by the walls and at the doors of the houses, saying to each other, ‘Come and hear the message that has come from the Lord.’ My people come to you, as they usually do,*”

and sit before you to listen to your words; but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain. Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well; for they hear your words, but do not put them into practice.”

Well, that’s one sure way to put a popular preacher in his place. The Lord said to Ezekiel, in effect, *“There’s no question that you put on a great show – to standing-room-only audiences. The people love you. Let’s face it; you’re a great preacher. The problem is: lives aren’t changed!”* What a word of correction! Apparently the Lord isn’t all that impressed with numbers, or popularity, enthusiasm and hype. He’s impressed with people who change their minds and their hearts and their behavior.

As a result of that little conversation with the Lord, Ezekiel was faced with a career decision. Up to that point he had been employed as a prophet of doom (and a very successful one of late). But then the devastation he had been predicting occurred. His job was done. Ah, but retirement wasn’t an option for Ezekiel. He was a prophet; he knew that he had been marked for life – singled out to speak for God.

It’s true that for years his theme had been a word of judgment. But Ezekiel was a true prophet, and he knew what all God’s prophets have known. God never offers a word of warning without a word of hope. Every time God’s judgment is pronounced there’s also a word of grace. Those two themes, judgment and grace, always belong together. Those who would speak for God cannot honestly preach all grace and no judgment. You folks are accustomed to hearing a lot of grace preached here. So when a word of judgment is preached, you may be ill prepared to handle it. And come Judgment Day, I will have to answer for that.

But just as those who would preach cannot preach all grace and no judgment, neither can they preach all judgment and no grace. So let me remind you: Beware any prophet of doom who is big on the wrath of God, but doesn’t have a good grasp of the grace of God. Ezekiel knew about God’s grace. But he’d been preaching a word of judgment for so long that he needed a workshop on how to preach grace. So now, at last, we come to today’s object lesson – Ezekiel’s little preaching seminar.

I suppose modern parapsychologists would call it an “out of body experience.” And it really was quite bizarre. Ezekiel was carried off by the Spirit on one his amazing “trips” – this time to a huge valley strewn from end-to-end and side-to-side with parched human bones. Ezekiel was instructed to walk around and take a good hard look at the scene while the Lord waited. Then, with Ezekiel sufficiently impressed by the ghastly scene, God asked him: *“Can these bones live?”*

The prophet's answer was, I suppose, a mixture of reverence and evasion. Reason told him that they couldn't possibly live. But this was God, after all, who asked the question. Presumably he had something in mind. And Ezekiel knew the Lord well enough to realize that if God had something in mind, something was going to happen. So Ezekiel adroitly sidestepped the issue and simply said, "*Lord, only you know the answer to that question.*"

God's response to Ezekiel must have nearly topped the prophet's list of strange things the Lord had directed him to perform. God said to Ezekiel, "*Preach to these bones.*" I can hardly imagine a congregation more challenging to preach to than one that is literally dead. I enjoy what Stuart Briscoe had to say about this scene. He wrote: "I often wonder what Ezekiel would have said if it had been left to him to decide. '*My dear bones... I'm happy to see so many of you here today!*' Or perhaps, '*As I stand before you all today, I am thankful that I feel slightly better than you look...*'" What would Ezekiel say?

Fortunately, God told him just what to say, and Ezekiel said it: "*Hear the Word of the Lord!*" Now that is preaching. I read that and I can't help but wonder how much of what we call "preaching" really is "the Word of the Lord." I sometimes think about what passes for preaching and I wonder: Is it really a faithful exposition of God's Word, or is it more an extemporaneous commentary on someone else's ideas?

So Ezekiel preached the Word of the Lord, and the response was incredible to say the least. That cluttered boneyard was transformed into a clattering skeleton storehouse. Ezekiel preached on; and as he did, the bones took on musculature, connective tissue, body fat, fluid and skin. There stood Ezekiel, facing a giant mortuary.

Then the Lord said, "*Son of man, preach to the breath*" (h'ruach). You may know that the Hebrew word "ruach" is translated as "breath" – but also as "wind" and "spirit." So Ezekiel preached to the ruach; and the Ruach of God blew breath into (in-spirited) all those dead people. Do you remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus about being born again? "*Consider the wind (h'ruach),*" he said. "*No one sees it. No one can control it. It is the same with the Spirit (the ruach of God) and those who are born of the Spirit.*"

So there they stood before Ezekiel. This wasteland of dry bones was now a massive army. With the object lesson complete, the preacher was ready for God's word of hope: "*Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.*" That is to say: "*These are your neighbors, your colleagues. These are the people who may have tolerated or ignored your hard words, who may have ridiculed you in the past, but who more recently have come to listen to you. These are the people who have more than sufficient reason to feel that their lives are dried up, wasted, going nowhere. They need help. They need to hear from you a word of grace.*"

Despite what you may think, feeling dried up like that can be a very promising state of affairs. To say that you have tried and tried but seem to be getting nowhere – to say that you’ve played the games but there’s no real “life” to your life – that is a good place to be. It can be, in fact, an early step in the process of being born again. Lloyd Ogilvie put it this way. He said we have to “own the bones.” Before we can experience resurrection in our lives we have to own the fact that there’s something inside us that needs it – that’s dead, dried up, wasted.

Assuming you’re a normal person, there have probably been times when you felt that part of your life was dead or dried up. It may be that you’re having some of those feelings right now. If so, you probably know that you are at least partially responsible for your predicament. The deadness in your life didn’t just “happen.” In fact, that dried up part of your life may have become so through your own neglect or abuse or bitterness. The proverb says it well: *“A cheerful heart is good medicine, but a bitter spirit dries up the bones.”*

Is that how you feel? When you feel like your life is a wasteland, it’s rather easy to find yourself asking not, *“Can these bones live?”* but *“Should these bones live?”* In other words, *“I’m not sure that I’m even worth salvaging.”* If that’s where you are, or you know someone in that predicament, listen to this. When God asked, *“Can these bones live?”* Ezekiel had the right answer: *“Lord, only you know.”* The same is true of the question, *“Should these bones live?”* Only God has the answer. But I’m here to tell you that God’s answer to both of those questions, for you or for anyone, is *“Yes!”* Yes, you can live again; and yes, in God’s eyes you should – because you’re worth it.

Before we leave this study, I want you to note God’s postscript to this little preaching seminar. He told Ezekiel to go preach to the whole house of Israel: *“This is what the Sovereign Lord says: ‘O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them.’”* And then God added this: *“I will put my Spirit in you and you will live!”* God not only announced his intention to resurrect the children of Israel. He purposed to put his Spirit into them as well. There would be a new birth of that nation. But far more important (and permanent) there would have to be a resurrection of their hearts and spirits as well.

“I will put my spirit in you,” said God. Those are ancient words, yet profoundly modern. Unless I’m grossly mistaken, many of God’s people today would be content with a physical resurrection, a new lease on life, without a spiritual resurrection as well. Granted, there is much to be said for a physical new beginning – whether it is the start of a new career or a new family or a new home or a new church. And of course, new beginnings like these are occasions well worth celebrating.

But God reminds us that a physical resurrection isn’t enough. And if we’re not diligent in seeking God’s Spirit, we might settle for a little reorganization and

assume that we've been renewed. We might preach to the dry bones around here and be delighted to get them all lined up in some degree of order. But all we will have really accomplished is ordered deadness. Sad to say, that is what some people call "church renewal." God has a better idea. He wants a people who have been renewed from within by his Spirit, as well as renewed on the outside. God help us to settle for nothing less than that.

αμεν