

The Fifth Sunday in Lent
April 2, 2017, Year A
St. Dunstan's Anglican Church, Largo, FL

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm 130

Romans 8:6-11

John 11:1-45

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

“The Lord said to me, “Prophesy to 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.”

The account of Ezekiel and the dry bones is one of those fascinating stories we all remember from Sunday School. It's exciting because it is so unusual – God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and they come together. Sinews and flesh reappear, and skin covers them. Then God tells Ezekiel, “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 upon these slain, that they may live.’ And the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceeding great host.”

The original purpose for this prophecy was to give hope to the Jewish nation as the people lived in captivity in Babylon after the Babylonians had destroyed the Temple and burned Jerusalem. The people were understandably dejected, and they needed something to restore their hope. This prophecy was a message from God that he would once again restore Israel – that just like these dry bones with no hope whatsoever for any kind of future could once again live, so too, the captives could take heart, there will be a future, your God is with you, and he will restore you to your former glory just as he has done with these dry bones.

This story is also exciting because it portrays the awesome power of God, a power available to us, a power that gives us hope just like it did for the Israelites in captivity. We who have been separated from God by sin, we who deserve death and eternal separation from God for our sins, we who should have no hope whatsoever – we have been brought back to life through the shed blood of Jesus Christ just like these dry bones. Just like these dry bones, we were once dead. Just like these dry bones, we had no hope. Just like these dry bones we were without remedy; when we were in our former sinful state, there was nothing we could do to fix it ourselves.

But just as God told Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, he also sent his Son, Jesus, to restore us to life, to take away the stain of sin, to stand us back on our feet as a holy and righteous people, a people set aside, different from the world around us, and holy as he is holy, and a people made right, made righteous, through a right relationship with God extended to us by Jesus himself.

This is resurrection power! We have been rescued from sin by a God big enough to do the job right and make its effects last forever. When God brought Jesus back from the dead on Easter morning, he abolished death forever.

Our physical bodies will cease to function some day when God determines that it is our time to leave the bounds of this mortal world, but our spirits will live on with him forever, and at the last day, after Jesus returns in great power and awesome glory, our physical bodies will be raised up just like the dry bones, and we will stand together before our Lord and Savior as a great army of the faithful, giving him worship and praise and honor and glory.

And look at the gospel reading this morning. Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that their brother, Lazarus, is dying. But Jesus delays in going to their aid because, in his own words, “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it.” In the mean time, Lazarus does die, and he is placed in a tomb.

In the dialog between Martha and Jesus, Jesus tells her that her brother will rise again. She acknowledges her understanding that this will happen at the last day, at which point, Jesus tells her “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.”

When God wants to act, he just speaks, and it happens. Remember in the creation narrative that God spoke, and things happened? “Let there be light, and there was light.” And so on through the six days of creation. In the recounting of the events concerning Jesus and Lazarus, the Word tells us that after he prayed, Jesus “cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ [And] the dead man came out.” There is power in the words of God, power to literally raise the dead back to life.

And what, you might be thinking, does this have to do with Lent? Sounds more like an Easter sermon! Well, it is an Easter sermon, because during Lent we are supposed to be preparing for the coming of Easter. During Lent, we are supposed to be focusing on spiritual housecleaning; it’s about getting our lives into better focus and alignment with what our Lord expects of us as his people.

The incredible power in the resurrection tells us a lot about this God that we serve, and it should help us to better understand the importance of what our Lenten devotions are really all about. Lenten devotions are not just the Christian equivalent of New Year’s resolutions! When we remember the incredible, awesome power that is one of the attributes of our God, a power that can and already has separated us from the power of sin and death, we get a better sense of how wonderful a privilege it really is to sit in his presence, to honor his name, and to obey his commands to us by fashioning our everyday lives more perfectly to his perfect will.

We are dedicating this year to spiritual growth, taking every thought captive to nourish the good things and discard the bad, to study Scripture with an intentional perspective of learning and growth, and to be in constant prayer to discuss the matter with God and seek his wisdom and will for all that we are and do.

Spiritual growth is about understanding the source and outworking of spiritual power. Spiritual growth is about finding practical ways to draw closer to God, to deepen our relationship with him through prayer, and living out our lives in ways that bring greater glory to His name.

Spiritual growth is about deepening our understanding of what it truly means to be transformed by the renewing of our minds and seeing that transformation as a life-altering process that began when we were made one with Christ and does not end.

When Jesus called Peter to step out of the boat and come to him, Peter walked on the water as though it were dry land, not because he grit his teeth in faith and believed as hard as he could that walking on water was possible because Jesus said so; that's human understanding using human wisdom to explain something God could do in human terms.

When we think and act spiritually, we start with God, not human strength. If I am a Christian, meaning one who is called by God to be one of his own, then I have access to resurrection power because I am a child of the living God. God determines what he wants us to be and do, and he makes that known to us through his good and perfect will. When he calls us to do things, we should just get up and get going and he will make happen through us the things he has planned. It's an entirely different perspective of the same thing when we look at God's wisdom and abilities to describe actions rather than human wisdom and understanding.

Paul summed it up in his letter to the Romans. He wrote, "to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace." The flesh means human understanding and human ways putting our own understanding first. But when we set our minds on the Spirit, when we put God in the driver's seat, then we see the hand of God at work in our lives and in our world in truly amazing ways.

The resurrection of the dry bones was a prophesy describing the restoration of Israel as a nation by God's hand and the reconciliation of the creation through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Lazarus was a real event to demonstrate God's power.

As we finish our Lenten devotions with the approaching Easter season, focus on the Holy Spirit at work in our lives. Through him and in partnership with him, we can move mountains.

I invite you all to an observance of a holy Lent.

And now unto you, O Lord, be ascribed all might, majesty, power and dominion. In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.