

THROUGH THE WORD

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Intro

Ezekiel is an individual who engenders a variety of responses. However, none of those reactions are what would be termed lukewarm. Some commentators feel that Ezekiel, who was a younger contemporary of Jeremiah, was one of the deportees in the first Babylonian exile in 597 bce. Others feel that while he did travel extensively, he was, in fact, in Judea, in and around Jerusalem, for his entire life. Certain commentators think that Ezekiel was a schizophrenic, as per the prophet's visions and their reading of chapter 4 (4:4-8) where he lies on his right side for 390 days and on his left side for 40 days. All of this is done without moving. Others feel that while he did have periods of depression (the time after his wife died is noted most often), and suffered symptoms that resemble a stroke, he was, in fact, of sound mind and body. Some commentators state that Ezekiel was a social recluse who was prone to prolonged periods of time when all he thought of was distant lands. Others feel that he was intimately engaged in his own personal life as well as all aspects of society. What we are left with is the understanding that Ezekiel is someone who has confounded the supposed experts.

However, what we do know, wherever reality may ultimately lie, is that the prophecies that God offered through this man are words that continue to engender a sense of conviction in the sight of God and the presence of hope as God continually provides. In Romans we heard about the former. In Ezekiel we absolutely hear the latter.

What I would like you to consider is this: what is it that allows an individual, or as the case may be a group, to grow in faith? The scripture reads this way.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

37 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ I will lay sinews on 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."

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸ I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, 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." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD.

“Through the Word”

Imagine going to sleep, all nice and toasty in your bed. You close your eyes and begin to drift off to sleep. The tiredness of the day, both physical and emotional, begins to drift away into the darkness. At peace.

Then something, an unnatural stillness, causes you to open your eyes, and you bear witness to a sight that causes you to wonder where you are and what is happening, because the sight that is before you strikes fear into your heart: a sea of lifeless bones. You step forward trying to get your bearings but with every step that you take, you hear a frightening crunch that you know must be brittle bones turning to dust under your weight.

Then, off to your right, the sound of stillness is replaced by a subtle rattling that intensifies with each passing second. You stare into the haze, squinting trying to see what is making that unnatural sound. What you begin to see are the bones clanking back together, with muscles appearing from out of nowhere to tie the bones into the human form that they once held and they are quickly covered over with flesh.

But there is something missing. These newly reformed bodies are not breathing. They are not yet alive. Yes, they are reformed, but they are not yet restored.

An instant later, the wind begins to whip from every direction, and it is as if this wind fills the lungs of the bodies. The bodies lurch upward straining to receive the air into the deepest portions of their form and begins to move toward you and you close your eyes, praying that these visions before you, are merely that. You open your eyelids to see your bedroom: no bones, no valley, no wind. All a vision in your mind.

Well, this is the vision that Ezekiel receives and this revelation takes him out to an undisclosed valley. This valley, however, would have been known by the Israelites as one of the places where their armies were beaten by the Babylonians. This battle was such a rout that there were not even people to take the dead and grant them a proper burial. The bodies were left to just rot and biodegrade so as to ultimately be reclaimed by the earth. However, the bones still remain there on the ground, scattered across the valley floor, dry as can be, an ominous reminder of the destruction that is felt by war.

It is in the middle of the valley, where you cannot escape the ever present reminders of death, that Ezekiel is led around by God and ultimately asked the question, “can these bones live?” Ezekiel’s response shows just how unlikely this is. “O Lord You know” is able to show us both how much Ezekiel trusts in God, but also how much he doubts that such a result can take place.

The amazing (dare I say frightening?) thing is, when Ezekiel begins to proclaim the Word of the Lord through his prophesy, what seemed impossible, takes place. The dry bones begin to come back together and with the entrance of the wind, that which was long dead has new life breathed into it. But it all takes place as a result of the Word of the Lord being offered.

Although the mainline churches (like the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Methodists) are by no means dead as has been described in the passage, they most definitely have been declining both in numbers and in influence, and I am sure that there are individuals who believe that this decline is, in fact, the death process of these denominational churches. This generalization is also true of the Reformed Church in America.

Now this does not mean that the community of faith here at Three Bridges is dying. We’re not...not by any means.

But that doesn’t mean that we haven’t been feeling this drag in our own context: we have.

And, thankfully, we’ve been open and willing to talk about it, recognizing that the world that we used to know (yes, even in our corner of Hunterdon County) has changed and is changing and that those changes are being felt within these walls.

When you start to look at the statistics (and I’m not going to bore you with the particular stats, but if you want to see them, they are only a few key strokes away), but what we are feeling is being felt in all but a few RCA churches, and that’s not just in this particular area, but all throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast.

So all of that set up was there...and then we took the Holy Cow congregational survey back in the fall. Generally speaking, do you know what it ended up telling us?

That what we have been feeling (at least as I have been articulating it) is something that we, as a congregation, are actually feeling: we have a moderately high degree of satisfaction with the church, but that we are struggling to have enough energy to really engage beyond what we’ve known. To that point, 96% of respondents felt that we, as a church, needed some level of change in order to move through the current energy malaise that we are feeling.

In that vein, I have some homework that I would like you prayerfully ponder and they come in the form of a couple of questions.

First off, what is our greatest strength as a community of faith (and how can we grow deeper in that strength)?

And then, what is our place of most needed improvement (and how do you feel that we might be able to improve in that area)?

Write it down, and get it over to me however you feel most comfortable, with or without name attached. After collecting these responses for a few weeks, I will collate the info so that consistory might have an opportunity to review the congregational opinion before we chat about some specifics toward the end of the month.

As you start to think about the responses to those questions, I want you to again consider what allowed the dry bones that we have been talking about in Ezekiel to begin to come back to life: the Word of God.

Sometimes that Word is proclaimed. Other times, that Word is lived out. But it is through the Word of God, knowing and trusting in the leading of God's Spirit as it moves through the Word of God that new life begins to emerge.

Look, we are a congregation that has been blessed in so many ways. And one of those blessings is that we have been able to recognize and articulate (even before some congregational survey) that we needed to work on some things and, as the case may be, change some things. All of these changes need to be led by and run through the filter of God's Word. If it isn't, then whatever we do will not help to build up the kingdom of God which is why we are here at all.

This collection of books, songs, and poetry that we know has the Holy Bible has some amazing power, if we are simply willing to allow it to be heard, and then respond accordingly. So often, we like to humanize why things happen, whether it be in the church or in our own lives. We talk about putting in a lot of hours, having a great plan, and doing all the necessary research. As we do this, we invariably end up taking way too much credit like we, in and of ourselves, had something to do with it.

Well, it isn't about us: it's about the Word of God being proclaimed, heard, and then responded to. You want to know where the growth of one's faith, let alone the church comes from? You need look no farther than trusting in the proclamation of the Word of God.

The Word of the Lord is able to transform those who were dead and breathe new life into them (and weren't all of us dead in sin prior to God welcoming us into the eternal arms through the sanctifying sacrifice of Jesus Christ?). The Word of the Lord is able to bring people of different persuasions and theological perspectives, and allow them to sit around the table of fellowship together, even when they may disagree. The Word of the Lord is able to cause a community of faith, individually and collectively, to mature, even while all the earthly signs point to the reality that the larger church is declining. The Word of the Lord: it is what empowers us to grow. Open it up, and hear how it is speaking to whatever dry bones you may have in your life today. Let us focus on the things that are of God and allow that light to shine!

After Sermon Prayer

Lord, as we hear in the recollections of the prophet Ezekiel, there is power in Your Word. We know this in our hearts, we have seen it in our lives, and yet we resist believing in its truth. We try and rationalize the reaction to Your Word in ways that make sense to earthly ears.

However, Your Word is not bound by our understanding. Lord, move in us so that we might proclaim Your Word boldly and fervently. Then, enable us to acknowledge the how the proclamation of Your Word is able to transform that which was struggling into that which is succeeding, that which was stagnant into that which has motion, and yes, that which was dead into those who are now alive. O Lord, let us feel the transforming power that is felt through Your Word. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.