

Valley of Dry Bones: Pentecost

Psalm 104:24-35, Eze 37:1-14 ; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:5-16

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Our culture seems to be infatuated with death. Watch popular TV programs and you know what I am talking about. The Walking Dead, and zombie movies get their audiences. In the American series of CSI, Crime Scene Investigation, our heroes find at least one dead person in every program of 50 minutes.

Just like in the popular series Bones. Not only do FBI Special Agent Seeley Booth and Dr. Temperance "Bones" Brennan always find or research a corpse; they are also able, within the span of 50 minutes, to find out the cause of death.

The hope in those TV programs is always related to finding out how living people became dry bones; for the corpses and the bones themselves no hope is offered. They are and they remain *as dead as a doornail*, to use an expression of William Shakespeare.

1 Hopelessness

Ezekiel had a vision of a valley, filled with bones. God placed Ezekiel right in the middle of them. Dry bones everywhere; the flesh picked off by vultures and the bones bleached in the sun.

This must have been a horrendous experience for Ezekiel. As a priest of God he was not even allowed to touch those corpses.

In the Near East at that time, the worst sort of contempt to pour on someone was to not bury him or her.

In the time of Ezekiel, Jerusalem had been destroyed and the Israelites had been led away to Babylon because they had broken their covenant with God. Ezekiel had also been taken into exile by the military leaders of Babylon.

Even the Temple of God had been turned into a ruin. And the royal house of king David had been finished for good.

Were the gods of Babylon stronger than the God of Israel? In accordance with the religious rationality of those days, many Israelites must have come to this conclusion.

They had lost their homes, their families, maybe even their God. Ezekiel personally was raised to be a priest in the temple; now he sat in Babylon as a priest with no temple. Not long before his wife had also died. Misery. So the vision he had, I guess, was also a reflection of his own feelings. Just as we sometimes feel so dry and miserable.

In the Psalms we often hear people lament their misery, about not being alright at all:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion...
How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land... [Psalm 137:1,4]

The Psalms also often use the theme of bones:

My strength fails because of my misery and my bones waste away. (Ps 31:10)
My bones are shaking with terror. (Ps 6:2)
My bones burn like a furnace. (Ps 102:3)

The reference to bones is an idiomatic way of referring to one's deepest miserable self. Ezekiel uses this to express the helplessness and the hopelessness of the people of God.

I do not mean to offend you, but the fact is that preachers today are often preaching at dry bones as well. Because that is how many people *feel*. And those preachers can often-times feel just as dry. Surely, we prefer not to talk about it, it is not *acceptable* or "*spiritual*". But that does not change the fact that we may be dry, lifeless, hopeless. Just so empty.

And like in those TV-series that I mentioned, we often know quite well *why* our lives are so stale. To know that is one thing, but it is much more difficult to change this and to be renewed!

But there is hope for renewal – for you and me as well. And that is the hope of Pentecost.

Nothing was left of Israel; so what about all the promises of God that the nation would have a golden future under a son of king David, with God in their midst?

We can ask these questions about ourselves as well. Where is God? Your personal relationships, your problems at work, what is going on in your life, that may make you feel dry and lost. Is there any hope?

2 God intervenes with Word and Spirit

Yes there is. Ezekiel was told to preach at these dead bones. He does not only *describe* the misery of the people of God, but he also shows that there is hope; his vision is *prophetic*. He does not only explain the situation of his nation; he also points to hope and a bright future.

God takes what is left of the people, their dry bones, and recreates them. The similarity with the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2 is striking. Just as God created Adam, he now takes the remains of the people of God, and recreates them. First he speaks his Word to create a body, then he breathes his Spirit into them to make them alive.

A key to understanding this passage is the Hebrew word used for wind, breath, and spirit. It is used 10 times in the 14 verses we have read in Ezekiel 37. These three words are all translations of the one Hebrew word *Ruach* – like the Arabic, *ruh*. This is the breath of life, the Spirit, that God blew into Adam; it is the wind Jesus speaks of when he says that we must be born again. And it is the Spirit that falls on Jesus' followers on the day of Pentecost.

The vision of the valley of dry bones is a promise to Israel of better things to come. The smoke is still rising from Jerusalem and the Temple; the walls of the city are ruined; the skeletons of the defeated Jews still litter the valleys; and the Israelites in Babylon feel like dry bones. But new life will come so do not be discouraged. The Spirit of God will return.

Have hope and do not despair! God will give new life. This is his core business.

How does God bring the nation to life again? How does he revive the dry bones? The first thing is, that He speaks. God said to Ezekiel:

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... So [Ezekiel says,] I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I prophesied, there was a sound, and behold, a rattling, and the bones came together bone to its bone. (Ez 37:4-5, 7)

God spoke his Word, and the dry bones listened to the Word. Not a bad idea for us either, when we feel dry on the inside. Listen to the Word of God. Read it. Read his promises. See how he desires to bless you and to be with you to encourage you.

The Words of God are not dry letters. Unlike our words, they are effective, because they fully represent who God is. What God speaks, also happens. When he spoke to Israel, things changed. When he speaks to you, things change – to begin with, you yourself change.

First God spoke his word through Ezekiel to the bones, and then the prophet had to also speak to the wind, the Spirit of God, to come into the dry bones. "I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live." (Ex 37:14) The Spirit of God is the key to our salvation. When God sends his Spirit, all things are possible. This is because the Spirit of God is the presence of God himself.

Humankind, you and I, without the Spirit of God reviving us, are like a car without fuel - just a bunch of scrap metal. A football without air. A Temple without the Spirit.

But God wants to make our lives so much richer, better, more worthwhile. Eternally worthwhile. He wants to take our deflated lives and fill them with himself.

In this passage we see a glimpse of the Triune God. God the Father, God the Word and God the Spirit. When it comes to God's saving acts, he is fully present to change our dryness into full new life.

And whatever happens to us, the eternal Spirit of God is always in us, around us like the wind, for leading us ever deeper into the life of the Triune God.

3 Israel's return

God's promise to decaying Israel was phenomenal. He promised a return to their land that paralleled the exodus from Egypt:

I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, o *my people*. And I will bring you into the land of Israel and you shall know that I am the Lord. [Eze 37: 12b-13a]

Central in this promise is that God says to Israel: "O *my people*". Because they belong to Him, he will bring them back to their land. He had a covenant with Abraham, the forefather of that nation.

The Israelites indeed returned from Babylon to Israel, to rebuild Jerusalem, and the Temple. You can read these stories in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. What God had spoken, he also did. And if we would read further in the next verses in Ezekiel 37, we see how God also promised:

My servant David will be king over them. [...] And I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forever. [Ex 37:24, 26]

Ezekiel begins with a dramatic vision of Israel in need, and he ends with pointing to the Messiah who would come to make all things new. In the past weeks we commemorated how Jesus came and died for us; how his bones were dead and buried and all hope was lost. But God revived him after 3 days. He made him alive again, the source of life for all who put their trust in him.

And not only did God make him alive, he also revived us. The giving of the Holy Spirit to the Church, and also to each of us individually, means that the source of life itself, God the Holy Spirit, is in our midst.

He has come back to his temple. His glory is in our midst. He has not left us dry and dead, he has not left us as orphans. God has come to be with us forever.

Our responsibility is to listen to God's word and to follow, and He comes with his Spirit into your life. To renew, to refresh, to recreate you from the inside out.

St Paul calls the Holy Spirit the deposit that God gave to us, guaranteeing that our life will be renewed and that one day, we receive the full price – eternal life with Him.

This promise of new life is something to look forward to, but the deposit of it is already present in our life. God is with us, in us, to make us into the people he wants us to be.

Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple was gone, but God promised something much bigger than a return, and a rebuilding: He promised that He himself would be in the midst of His people. And this promise he made true with Pentecost. His glory returned - not to a stone temple, but to the community of his followers.

Conclusion

We may feel like dry bones - but God is desirous to change our dry bones and make us alive again. And that happens, when He himself becomes part of our existence through his Word and his Spirit.

The more we take his Word into our life and the more we invite his Spirit to work in us, the more our lives will resemble, well, truly living people. People alive with life of an eternal quality .

So when you feel worn out, do not despair. God is very near. Do not stop taking His word into your life; instead, listen to Him.

And you may not even notice the soft breeze, the silent wind... Sometimes the presence of God may be so hard to notice. But He is in your life, He wants to fill you, his temple and make you enjoy his presence so that dryness disappears and the joy of his Spirit fills our hearts.

+ Amen