

**Sermon: Lent 5 (A)**

**St. Peter's, Norfolk**

**Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:17-44**

**Date: March 29, 2020**

A famous composer was once asked: ***“If you knew you had to spend the rest of your life on a desert island, which of your 400 musical compositions would you take with you?”*** After giving it some thought, he replied, ***“I’d take some blank paper because my favorite composition is always the one I’ll write next.”*** That same **“look ahead”** spirit is prevalent in the Bible. It’s a spirit that challenges us to live each day hopefully and creatively, regardless of our current circumstances.

There are a lot of people in the world, in our nation, and in our communities who don’t feel very hopeful right now. In fact, many would describe their circumstances as ***“hope-less.”*** Rather than living each day creatively, some would say that it is a struggle just to make it through each new day. They are consumed by fear, anxiety, and worry over the Corona Virus crisis in our midst and its impact on the finances of their families and of our nation. It’s easy sometimes to feel discouraged (isn’t it?) when so much bad news is being reported by television, and by radio, and found in print.

Times were also depressing in the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. but for a different reason. The people of Israel were being held captive in Babylon- modern day Iraq. They longed to return to their homes. They knew that their beloved city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians, and that the Temple was in

ruins. And it appeared there would be no immediate release from their exile. And so, they were discouraged. Their hope was dead, and their spirits were dry.

But among them was a prophet of God named Ezekiel; and God had given Ezekiel a marvelous vision to share with the people. It was the vision of the *Valley of Dry Bones*. It spoke powerfully to those ancient Israelites, and I believe it can speak powerfully to us today because (the truth is) we are not all that different from those ancient Israelites.

Today, people are asking: ***“Is there hope for our country (the United States) as it seemingly descends into moral anarchy? Is there hope for the future of the Church with its divisions and its contentiousness, its apathy, and its lack of deep commitment? Is there hope for the person who has just been diagnosed with cancer? Or for the wife who has just buried her husband of 40 years? Or for the parents whose son or daughter just committed suicide?”*** The vision given to Ezekiel speaks directly to situations such as these- situations where all hope is seemingly dead.

In the vision, God transports Ezekiel to a great valley filled with very dry bones. Apparently a vast army of Israel had been defeated in a battle there, and so many had been slaughtered that the dead had never been buried. Animals and birds had picked the corpses clean, and the sun had bleached the dry bones white. As a result, the whole valley had become an immense bone yard. It was literally a ***“death valley.”***

And the Lord asked Ezekiel a very pointed question, **(3)** ***“Ezekiel, can these bones live?”*** Ezekiel gave the only answer any human could, ***“Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”*** Then the Lord told Ezekiel, **(4)** ***“Prophecy to these bones, Ezekiel, and say to them: Dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. I will make breath enter you and you will come to life....and you will know that I am the Lord.”*** And Ezekiel writes, **(7)** ***“So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone.”***

Now, we see right from the start that the Word of God has incredible power. God needs only to speak and what He commands is accomplished. There is no work involved. God’s Word in itself has the power to accomplish what is spoken. Remember the *Story of Creation* in the Book of Genesis? God spoke....and it took place. ***“God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.....God said, ‘Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water’, and it was so. God called the expanse ‘sky’”.*** **(1:3, 6, 8)**

In the same way, when God commanded the dry bones in the valley to live, they immediately started coming together into human skeletons.

This same power of God’s Word was dramatically displayed in the resurrection of Lazarus- part of our Gospel reading this morning. Lazarus had been dead and buried four days. Yet after

the stone had been removed from the entrance to the tomb, Jesus had only to stand at the entrance of the cave and speak the words, ***“Lazarus, come out!”*** And immediately, the dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with grave-clothes and his face wrapped in a cloth. God spoke...and Lazarus was alive! There is nothing that the Word of God can't accomplish. It has power beyond our human imagining....beyond our human understanding.

My friends, no matter how hopeless your situation may seem, God can make the dead bones of it live again...if only you will hear His Word and take it to heart....if you read His Word and believe that He can do what He promised there. The Word of God has power beyond all human understanding to do what it promises and commands. Even dead bones can become a valiant, and living army.

But, in Ezekiel's vision, there was still one thing lacking in this vast horde in the valley that had their bones connected again and had flesh and tendons and skin over them. They weren't breathing! In fact, they were all lying lifeless on the ground like an army of mannequins.

So God took the final step, He said to Ezekiel, ***(9) “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’”*** Ezekiel adds, ***(10) “So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath entered them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, a***

***vast army.***” God breathed into them the breath of life, just as He had in the creation of Adam. Genesis 2 says, ***“Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”***

This is the work of the Holy Spirit. The word for breath, wind, and spirit is one word in ancient Hebrew (**Ruah**). We are reminded in this vision of Ezekiel of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. The Holy Spirit breathes into us the faith to trust God and the energy to serve Him. Our faith is given by the Spirit, and our desire to serve is empowered by the Spirit. God is the only One who can breathe into us the breath of a spiritual life.

I may be dating myself here, but one of my all-time favorite comedy teams was the husband and wife team- George Burns and Gracie Allen. In real life, Gracie was a bright and intelligent businesswoman, but she always played the part of the naïve, off the wall person who was sweetly simple in her approach to life.

In one of their comedy sketches, Gracie was upset because her new electric clock kept losing time. Each day it lost time, so she finally called a repairman. He discovered the problem immediately. There was nothing wrong with the clock. The problem was that the clock wasn't plugged in! Gracie said, ***“Oh, I know that! I didn't want to waste electricity, so I only plug it in when I want to know what time it is!”***

That's the way some of us treat our faith, isn't it? We are only plugged in when we want something. But the Good News is that God's power, the power of His Holy Spirit, is available to us always....all the time...in any situation. But we need to stay plugged in.

Are you in a situation that seems as hopeless as a death valley of very dry bones? Does it seem that no life at all is stirring in the boneyard? It doesn't have to be the threat of the Corona Virus, it may be a frightening medical diagnosis. It may be unemployment that has stretched on for over two years. It may be a son or daughter, or grandchild who in their teen years has become ***"wild"*** and is questioning all authority.

Whatever it is (and there are many different kinds of valleys of dry bones, there is always the God who can make dead bones miraculously come alive again. Where His all-powerful Word is faithfully proclaimed and totally accepted, and where believers support and intercede for each other, and where the Holy Spirit is earnestly sought to breathe spiritual life into the persons involved, there miracles will take place.

That ***"valley of dry bones"*** will become a living army of conquerors standing on their feet by the grace of almighty God.

It took place for Ezekiel, and it can take place for you, too.  
Amen.