

TRINITY EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
MINOCQUA, WI
SERMON FOR MAY 19 & 20, 2024

The hand of the Lord was upon me. He brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley, which was full of bones. ² He had me pass through them and go all over among them. There were very many on the valley floor, and they were very dry.

³ He said to me, "Son of man, can these dry bones live?" I answered, "Lord God, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'"

⁵ This is what the Lord God says to these bones.

I am about to make breath enter you so that you will live. ⁶ I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you will live. Then you will know that I am the Lord.

⁷ So I prophesied as I had been commanded, and as I was prophesying there was a noise, a rattling, as the bones came together, one bone connecting to another. ⁸ As I watched, tendons were attached to them, then flesh grew over them, and skin covered them. But there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the wind. Prophecy, son of man, and say to the wind that this is what the Lord God says. From the four winds, come, O wind, and breathe into these slain so that they may live."

¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me. Breath entered them, and they came back to life. They stood on their feet, a very, very large army.

¹¹ Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They are saying, 'Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.' ¹² Therefore, prophecy and say to them that this is what the Lord God says. My people, I am going to open your graves and raise you up from your graves and bring you back to the soil of Israel. ¹³ Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live. I will settle you on your own land, and you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord."

(Ezekiel 37:1-14 EHV)

This is not your average travel destination, this valley of dry, lifeless bones. Nothing like northern WI or CA or FL beaches where so many flee during the summer. No lush green landscape complete with hills/forests/meadows/lakes/streams/ocean views. Ezekiel's valley is more like Death Valley. It is literally Death Valley. There is no life here. Only bones, dead men's bones. The valley is full of them. White/bleached/broken/brittle/lifeless and very dry. These bones have been here for a long time.

"Son of man, can these dry bones live?" (v. 3) The question is ridiculous. Ezekiel knew that these long dead remains could not come back to life. Skeletons don't spontaneously spring upright, reattach themselves, reassemble and live again. Death is the end. Ezekiel knows all this, but he gives a great answer. "Sovereign Lord, you alone know." Not "I don't know" or "Lord, do you know what you're doing?" He simply says, "Only you know, Lord. You tell me."

God explains, **"Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They are saying, 'Our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off.'"** (v. 11) This vision illustrates the spiritual state of God's Old Testament people. Much of Israel was in exile in Babylon at the time, six centuries before the time of Christ. They lived in absolute hopelessness and utter despair, afraid they'd never be able to return home. They were desolate, desperate – for all practical purposes, dead, spiritually dead. It was their sin that had gotten them in trouble in the first place.

So what does this valley of dry bones have to do with us? With Pentecost? With Pentecost? This is an accurate portrayal of our own natural sinful condition. Sinful by nature, dead in sin, hostile to God. Sin saps us of spiritual life. Pick your poison – worry, greed, covetousness, dishonoring God's name, abuse of health and body by overeating, overdrinking, pushing too hard. Our sins – all of them – make us lifeless, dead, dry. Nothing this side of heaven can revive or save us. We need celestial CPR.

Remedy? ***“Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.’”*** (v. 4) Imagine standing at Evergreen Cemetery down the road and preaching a sermon to all of the skeletons and bones that lie there. Good afternoon, you’re probably wondering why I’m speaking to all of you today. Strange. That might get you committed, or at least checked out. God, however, speaks to the dead – the spiritually dead – all the time.

Ezekiel did as he was told. He prophesied these words: ***“This is what the Lord God says to these bones. I am about to make breath enter you so that you will live. I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you will live. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”*** (vv. 5,6) What a sight ensued! What sound! What a commotion! Everywhere across the entire valley dry bones came together with a rattling sound. Everywhere across the valley the foot bone connected to the ankle bone/ the ankle bone connected to the shin bone/the shin bone connected to the knee bone/the knee bone connected to the thigh bone/the thigh bone connected to the hip bone, etc., etc. And it was more than just bones. Tendons, flesh, and skin covered the newly reassembled skeletons. But there was still one thing missing.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the wind. Prophesy, son of man, and say to the wind that this is what the Lord God says. From the four winds, come, O wind, and breathe into these slain so that they may live.” So I prophesied as he commanded me. Breath entered them, and they came back to life. They stood on their feet, a very, very large army.” (vv. 9,10) Ezekiel prophesied and a vast army of bodies now came to life and stood on their feet. This isn’t a Stephen King novel or a Hollywood horror movie screenplay entitled Valley of the Living Dead. This was a glorious vision that assured the exiled Israelites that they would have life beyond Babylon. Many would, in fact, return home. Most importantly, God was still with them and the Spirit’s power was still working in them.

Dry bones, dead-in-sin hearts need the Spirit’s breath. Nothing less than celestial CPR has occurred in our hearts and lives. We cannot by nature come to God; he comes to us. We cannot reach out for him, decide for him, choose him, or embrace him – God the Holy Spirit does it all. In the fourteen verses of our text, God speaks directly in nine of them. Twelve times God uses “I” – ***“I am about to make breath enter you so that you will live. I will attach tendons to you. I will put flesh back on you. I will cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you will live. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”*** (vv. 5,6) ***“My people, I am going to open your graves...Then you will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and raise you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my Spirit in you, and you will live. I will settle you on your own land, and you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, declares the Lord.”*** (vv. 12-14)

And a half dozen times the word “breath” is used, which is also the Old Testament Hebrew word for Spirit. Martin Luther explained it this way, ***“I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”*** Through his appointed means of grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacraments the Holy Spirit has breathed and continues to breathe spiritual life into our hearts.

There’s no question that the Spirit has worked and continues to work in our lives and yet there are times when that valley of dry bones seems an accurate description of how we’re doing. You’re busy – rushing about life – like ducks in a shooting gallery, first one way and then another. Back and forth from one appointment to the next, from one crisis to the next, sometimes multiple crises all at the same time.

Sometimes you might feel like you’re living in a graveyard, the graveyard of a dead/dying relationship, the graveyard of struggling finances and overwhelming debt, the graveyard of a marriage – not much love and life left, it seems. The graveyard of a decadent, death-filled culture – moral decay and celebrated carnality and incessant immorality. And faith dries up. Not only can your faith not move mountains, it’s barely crawling deep in the desert of despair. The joy is gone. You find yourself questioning God, doubting his power and even his grace. Your prayer life comes out in little drips, if at all. You feel dried up and burned out.

Too often we try to handle this on our own. Just have to bear down and buck up. Grin and bear it. We tell ourselves, “This is no big deal, I can handle things.” This pitcher of water is no big deal – it doesn’t weigh much. I can handle this, hold it up – for a while. How about an hour from now – same pitcher of water, but it will feel a lot heavier. 24 hours from now? Not a chance. The more we try to handle things, the more we try to hold up under everything, the more quickly we’ll dry up and burn out, spiritually speaking.

Ever see someone self-administer CPR – chest compressions, counting, breathing? It doesn't work. Someone else needs to do it. With David, we cry out, ***"Create in me a pure heart, O God. Renew an unwavering spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Sustain me with a willing spirit."*** (Psalm 51:10-12) The Holy Spirit administers celestial CPR, breathing life and faith and strength into us through God's Word. The Spirit gets us dry bones to where we need to be – he refreshes the soul, changes our perspective, rearranges our priorities.

Can these bones/our bones/we live? By the Spirit's breath we do. We live in the joy and certainty of forgiveness. We live with Spirit-directed focus on Jesus who gave up his life to pay for our sin and who conquered death to open the door to heaven. Regardless of circumstances, regardless of difficulties and challenges, even in the midst of despair, dry bones live/we live through the blood of Jesus and the breath of the Spirit. There is always hope. There is always a future. There is always Jesus.

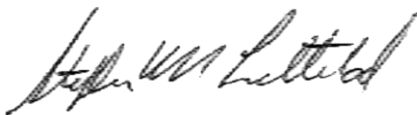
Nine years ago this month, the small town of Menasha, WI – just south of where I grew up in Appleton – endured horrific, unimaginable loss. A 27 year old man, distraught over the recent breakup with his fiancée, rode his bike to a nearby park, and began randomly firing two handguns at complete strangers. He killed three innocent bystanders before taking his own life. Among the dead, a father Jon Stoffel and his 11 year old daughter Olivia. Stoffel's wife Erin was critically injured, but is recovering – a blessing for their other two surviving children, ages 5 & 7, who were also at the park but unharmed.

Erin Stoffel reports that her husband's last words after being shot were, "Forgive the shooter." Who does this? Who dares to say, to even think this? Only God's people do, by the power of the Spirit. We love because he first loved us. Even as physical life was leaving him, the Spirit's breath enabled Jon Stoffel to show Christ's unimaginable love in his final moments on this earth. Now, he and his daughter enjoy uninterrupted joy in the Savior's presence as they wait for eternity's blink of an eye to pass in order to be reunited with all their loved ones.

Oliver and Landon, there's so much life in front of you: high school, post high school education, jobs, career, accomplishments, achievements, marriage maybe, children of your own – but let's not get ahead of ourselves here. So many changes in the years to come: some are awesome, some not. But there is one thing what won't change, one thing you can always count on, and it isn't a thing – it's Jesus.

You have life, the life that matters, spiritual life, life with God. You have faith created and nurtured through Word and Sacrament. You have a home in heaven. And all of it is God's gift to you. When you struggle, when you falter, when you doubt, when hope seems far off, when you just don't know what to think or what to do – there is One who hears, one who knows, one who holds you in the palm of his hand. And what must you do, what must we all do at times like that, really, every day? One thing: remember Ezekiel's valley, this spiritual death valley, and remember God's command: "Dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord!"

Our focus needs to remain on Jesus. Because the day is coming when he will say, "I am going to open up your graves." And there will be the grinding of millions of toppling tombstones and the creaking of millions of opening vaults, the rattling together of billions of sets of bones – including yours and mine – covered anew with tendons and flesh and skin – the thunderous rapture of the homecoming of the entire household of God. And a voice will call out, ***"The Lord has spoken and I have done it."*** No more dry bones. No more death and dying. No more ashes to ashes and dust to dust. Only life – eternal life powered by the Almighty Spirit of God. Come, Holy Spirit, renew our hearts and kindle in us the fire of your love.



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