

It seems like a strange story for Pentecost: Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones. At first glance it seems gruesome and macabre—a valley filled with bones. It seems more appropriate for Halloween than Pentecost.

And yet the story is all about God's Holy Spirit. The Old Testament word for "spirit" is *ruach*. *Ruach* appears 10 times in our OT lesson today. Sometimes it's translated as "spirit," sometimes it's translated as wind, sometimes it's translated as breath. But God's *Ruach*, God's Spirit is very present in this lesson.

Chapter 37 begins with a wonderful line, "The hand of the Lord came upon me."

Quick background:

We're almost 6 centuries before the time of Jesus. The Prophet Ezekiel is in exile in Babylon. His homeland has been destroyed by the Babylonians. Jerusalem is in ruins. The temple is gone. The Jewish intelligentsia have been taken to live in forced exile in Babylon.

And any rational observer in that culture and that time would say that there must have been a battle between the gods. The Babylonian god and the Jewish God must have fought each other. Undoubtedly the Babylonian god Marduk went head to head with YHWH, the God of the Jews, and Marduk clearly won. In the ancient mid-east, the fact that the Jews were defeated obviously meant their God was impotent and probably dead. Why else would the Jews be captives in Marduk's home territory?

And yet, Ezekiel still experiences God's presence. "The hand of the Lord came upon me."

Don't miss this subtle but important message. God is not dead. God is present, God is alive, God is active. And what's more God is able to operate in Babylon. In a world where deities were regarded as being restricted in terms of territory, the fact that God operates at will in what should be Marduk's home territory means that God is more powerful after all. God comes to his prophet, even in Babylon and stretches forth his powerful hand.

And then God's Spirit takes Ezekiel to a valley filled with bones. Don't miss this. This is not a mountain-top experience. It is exactly the opposite. Ezekiel is taken to a valley of death.

And then, God leads Ezekiel around and around through the valley of the bones. This is not a cursory glance at the bones. Ezekiel is asked to wade through the bones. Around and around so that it sinks in. Bones. Bones. Bones.

And they're described as very dry. They're old. They're not fresh. They've been dead for a long time.

And then God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?"

Of course, the answer is clear: "No way!" Can you make living human beings out of dead, dried up bones? No way.

Technology has come a long, long way in the past 2,600 years since Ezekiel. But we still can't turn dry bones into living bodies. We might be able to hook bones together. We might be able to give them machinery to make them move around. We might be able to cover them with a synthetic skin. But will they be alive? Of course not.

I've visited to Disneyworld. Disneyworld has lots of robots, lots of animatronics, lots of things that move around and make noise and look like they're alive. But we know they're not. Nobody mistakes the robot Abraham Lincoln for the real Abraham Lincoln.

Can these bones live? Of course not. We know that. Ezekiel knows that.

And yet he hedges his answer to God. Ezekiel pleads the 5<sup>th</sup>. He doesn't answer directly. God asks, "Can these bones live."

And Ezekiel answers, "O Lord God, you know."

It's probably an evasive answer. And yet, Ezekiel has seen some amazing visions. And while his answer is evasive, it also is open ended. It is open to the possibility that God's power can do something that is beyond belief, beyond understanding, even with dry bones.

Ezekiel walks around and around the valley and sees bones. Yet the Holy Spirit invites him to look at the bones in a different way. The Spirit invites Ezekiel to see the bones not as humans see them, but as God sees them.

God commands Ezekiel, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

In human terms, a valley of dry bones is a dead end. It's a dead end in every sense of the word "dead," and in every sense of the word "end." And yet with God it's not a dead end after all. There is apparently a promise of life.

So Ezekiel prophesizes to the bones as he had been commanded.

And amazingly, the bones start to come together.

When I was a kid we used to sing the old African-American spiritual:

"Them bones, them bones, them dry bones,

Now hear the Word of the Lord.

The toe bone connected to the foot bone.

The foot bone connected to the ankle bone.

The ankle bone connected to the shin bone..."

And on and on and on. The bones come together. The bones start to rattle together. And then there are tendons, then muscle, then skin. Bones become bodies. And yet, even though the bones reassemble themselves into bodies, we're told there was no breath in them. There was no *ruach*, there was no Spirit in them.

Turning dry bones into whole bodies is impressive. But it's not yet life. And so God tells Ezekiel to prophesy again: "Prophesy to the breath (prophesy to the ruach), 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."

Reconstituting bodies from dry bones is amazing. But it's not life. Life only comes from God's Spirit, God's Ruach, God's Breath, God's Wind.

And when the Holy Spirit is breathed upon the bodies, they are truly animated, truly alive, and they stand up, a vast multitude. Literally a vast army.

And then God interprets the message of this vision. The dry bones represent the whole house of Israel. The people think that they're lost in exile and defeat. The people think they're without hope. The people think they're dead as a nation. But God sees things differently. He promises to bring them out of exile, to restore them to their land, to bring them back to life as a people and as a nation.

And what's more, the message is to the **WHOLE** house of Israel. Not just the exiles from the Southern kingdom who were carried into captivity in Babylon. The term also encompasses the Northern kingdom that had been wiped off the map 150 years earlier. God has power to bring all of his people out of what seems to be a lost and hopeless situation.

God says, "I will put my Spirit (my Ruach) within you and you shall live." With God, new life is possible. But new life is possible only through the Holy Spirit.

Now we live 2,600 years later. And yet, there are parallels for us. As 21<sup>st</sup> century American Christians, as 21<sup>st</sup> century Episcopalians, we live in a time of decline. We're not in exile. But we remember a time when we were larger than we now are. We're shrinking. That's the reality we're living with.

Christianity is shrinking in our culture. All Christian groups in America are experiencing overall decline. The only groups that consistently buck that trend are churches made up of first generation immigrants from the third world.

Otherwise, Christianity is shrinking overall in the United States. The fastest growing religious group is the so-called "nones," N-O-N-E-S. Those with no religion.

Yes, the church in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world experiences phenomenal growth. But in the west, we're in a period of decline.

We might be tempted to fall into the trap of despair. We might be without hope.

We might try to do everything we can to rattle bones together maybe to force bones to connect up. Maybe we can even cover them with synthetic flesh and skin. We might strategize and plan and try new things. And that can be a good thing.

But it won't count for anything unless we let God's Holy Spirit breathe upon us. We must let God's Wind blow through us to bring us life. Otherwise, we may as well be just a bunch of dry bones.

And this applies to all of us as individuals as well. I don't know about you, but there are times when I look in the spiritual mirror, and if I'm honest with myself, I see more skeleton than flesh. There are times when I catch glimpses of dry bones.

I need the Holy Spirit. "Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew..." I need God's Ruach to invigorate me, to enliven me, to renew me. And I suspect you do to.

We need more than the skeletal frame of the Body of Christ. We need the Spirit to bring us life.

Holy Spirit, breathe on us. Blow through us. Enliven us. Fan our flames.

We may seem to be in a valley of dry bones. But the Lord is God. May he rattle our bones together. May he breathe his life into us.

Come Holy Spirit, come.