

PENTECOST  
Ezekiel 37:1-14  
*Dry bones come to life*

Every seminarian, whether he wants to admit it or not, has an ideal congregation in mind. I knew what I wanted. I wanted to be in Michigan, close enough to Detroit to be able to head down there for a day and get Lions games on the television, but not close enough for anyone to hear high school stories or see baby pictures. I wanted to be at a church that appreciated its heritage, doctrinally and liturgically. Tricia wanted to be in the country. I wanted to be in a city. So we compromised, and agreed to want to be in the country near a city. But it is a solemn seminary tradition never to speak such things aloud to others, because superstition says that if you do tell anyone what your ideal congregation is, you will end up as far away from it as possible. For all of our dreaming, however, we all knew that God, and not we, would decide what we needed, and where we were needed.

Ezekiel probably had an ideal congregation in mind as a young prophet. That ideal congregation never came to pass, however. He had spent his ministry preaching to hostile Israelites who had impenitently given themselves over to indifference or idolatry. Ezekiel had a tough ministry, but he served where God called him. If I were a betting man, however, I would wager a hefty sum that Ezekiel never expected to end up serving a congregation put before him today.

Step into Ezekiel's well worn sandals for a moment. The hand of the Lord comes upon you and suddenly you find yourself in the middle of a valley. Not only are you in the middle of a valley, hardly a place for a pulpit to begin with, but you are in the middle of a valley filled with bones. And not only are you in the middle of a valley filled with bones, but with dry bones. And then, unbenounced to you, there is a test: "*Son of man, can these bones live?*" "Um, *O Lord God, you know, don't you?*" But no answer comes; just an order.

"*Prophecy over these bones.*" Huh? What? Prophecy to bones, to dry bones? But there is no time for questions. Your sermon is already written for you and you'd better memorize it, because you are not to summarize it, you are to preach it as it has been given to you. You are not to say, "The LORD kinda sorta said something like this..." No, you are to say, "*Thus says the Lord.*" You see, O son of man: no one cares what you think. These bones are here to reap, not the fruit of your mind, but of God's. "*Thus says the Lord*"—a serious responsibility, but also a comfort to pastor and flock.

"*Say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon 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.'*"

And the weird just gets weirder. "*Prophecy to the dry bones and tell them they are going to come to life.*" Sure, and then we can tell a pig to fly and hell to freeze over. But "*thus says the LORD.*" And you know what the thing about the LORD is? He calls the shots when you work for Him and he can kinda sorta like do whatever He wants to do. "This might not be your ideal congregation, O son of man, but it is mine," the LORD in essence says.

I thought it is challenging to preach to you all sometimes, but at least you nod your head, whether in agreement or in slumber. Imagine preaching to dry bones. But Ezekiel was a good pastor of his skeletal flock and he gave them the LORD's Word, foolish as it may have seemed.

And guess what happened? The LORD did exactly what He promised. *“So 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. And I looked, and behold, there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them. But there was no breath in them.”*

Sound familiar? *“Then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.”* That’s God for you, isn’t it, always bringing something out of nothing or life out of death? God created man from dust and gave them life with His breath, with His Spirit, and now God takes dead men and does the same all over again, forming them and then filling them with breath by His own breath, just as it was meant to be, so that we breathe in God’s love and breath out our gratefulness.

*“Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.’ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.”* The prophet saw dry bones. The LORD God saw His Church, a mighty army, waiting only for His breath, His Spirit, to bring it to life.

And God just doesn’t change much, does He? *“When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.*

And dry bones came to life as God breathed His Spirit into His Church. Up to this time, the disciples may have seen dry bones, but God had seen His Church, a mighty army, waiting only for His breath, His Spirit, to bring it to life. And with God’s breath, by His Spirit, everything changed.

Dry bones—that’s what we have heaped up in Swan Valley today. We come laden with the burdens of the week and more certain of our shortcomings than of anything we have to offer to God. Perhaps many of you feel like hope is lost and you have been cut off. Perhaps we wonder in our own lives, in our own vocations, in our own families, even in our own congregation, *“Why, Lord, have you brought me here?”*

But the LORD God is still the LORD God, and He still sets sons of men, sons of Adam, in valleys filled with dry bones and says: *“Prophesy.”* So here it is: *“Thus says the LORD,”* not me, not anyone else. God is living, and in Yahweh there is no death. So listen up. The LORD will lay sinews on you and dress you with flesh and skin. He will make His breath your breath, and you will know that He is the LORD. Come out of the four winds, O Breath, O Spirit of God, and bring new life out of death. Wake up, God’s children, dry bones, for your Father has spoken. Who cares if nothing in you seems impressive, if nothing in you sings or shines? The LORD our God is breathing, and, when He breathes, dry bones come to life. So breathe, Jehovah; breathe Your Spirit into your remnant. Put your Spirit in us and one day bring us to the Promised Land. We are dry bones, dead in sin and buried in guilt, but you make something out of nothing and bring life out of death; so breathe. The Lord has spoken, and what he speaks must come to pass. Dry bones, you are the LORD’s mighty army. Dry bones, you are alive, wet with grace, dressed in the flesh Christ took at conception and offered on the cross in death. God is breathing; He is breathing His Spirit through the Means of Grace. Breathe in forgiveness. Breathe out love and praise. *“Thus says the LORD.”* Amen.