

IRVING NORTH CHRISTIAN CHURCH
REV. JOHN BURTON
APRIL 10, 2011

SERMON: IN THE VALLEY OF DRY BONES
TEXT: EZEKIEL 37:1-14

INTRODUCTION

I remember a night when Phyllis and I dined with Paul and Ruth Few, old friends from Nebraska. For the most part we told stories and ate ribs at Red Hot and Blue, and without bragging I can tell you by the time we were finished there was a might big pile of ribs on the table. That pile started me wondering about just how many ribs they served every day at that restaurant. O doggie dreams of heaven – they must have made an enormous, a mountainous big pile of sucked clean bones!

But those aren't dry bones. When some people think of dry bones some will think of "rolling the bones" at a casino. (Baby needs new shoes – gimme a 7 the hard way.) But, being a golfer shapes the way I think – I know the sound which a pile of dried bones makes as it shuffles down the fairway toward yet another double bogey after all chances of victory or even respectability have been thrown away – but you have to finish the round before they will let you lay down and die of shame. O the sound of dried bones rattling in the wind down on the golf course.

Which brings me to my text for the day – From Ezekiel 37: 1-14

The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." Then he said to me, "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. I will lay sinews on 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." So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me,

“Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophecy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act,” says the LORD.

BODY

Ezekiel tells us that God took him to a valley of dry bones. One can imagine all the discarded rib bones that Red Hot and Blues and Sony Bryant’s and Joe T. Garcias and every other DFW BBQ place has served in a lifetime – and it would still not be enough to fill that valley.

In his vision, I do not know that this was a physical place, like Auschwitz, or Hiroshima, or the ‘killing fields’ of Thailand, or the mass graves of Bosnia, Iraq, or Somalia, but we cannot think about Ezekiel’s valley of dry bones without thinking of such places of devastation and annihilation, like the World Trade Towers or the Pentagon or a field in Pennsylvania where the last hijacked plane crashed.

Ezekiel said that the spirit of the Lord set him down “in the middle” of a valley full of bones. Then the spirit led him around so that he might see them and take in the devastation of the place.

I cannot imagine Ezekiel’s being untouched, emotionally, by what he saw, any more than anyone could who saw the huge hole that once anchored the World Trade Center Towers or saw the wreckage of the towers before they were removed.

Ezekiel walked through those mounds and mounds of bones and I suspect that he, like the people to whom he would share this vision, wondered if the bones belonged to the army of Judah, utterly annihilated before the Jews were carted off into exile. No longer

unidentified bones – but fathers and sons and brothers with names and faces whom had families that grieved for them and lit candles in their memory.

And at that moment, the Lord asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?”

Ezekiel’s response was rather vague. He said, “O Lord, you know.” But what did he mean? If we could have seen his face and hear his inflection we might know if he was filled with confidence or if he was filled with resignation. I may not know exactly what he meant but I do know that never in the Book of Ezekiel did he ever question or doubt the power of the Lord to accomplish miracles – or, at the very least, he was never foolish enough to say so to the Lord.

Still, the answer was mounded up all around him. Those bones were dry – parched – picked clean and bleached white. We’re not talking about Lazarus here, four days in the grave! These bones had been chewed on by wild animals and birds and bugs for so long that they were picked clean! Those were some mighty gnarly bones!

“Can these bones live?” the Lord asks. And we answer, “Of course not.” That was one dead army. It was not coming back and everyone knew it. But the Lord had something else in mind. The Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesize to the bones and to tell them that the Lord was going to make them live.

Now, I’m no prophet, I’m just a latter day preacher, but the thought of preaching to a valley of dry bones, well...it makes me think of standing on a soap box and preaching to the rubble of the World Trade Center or the Pentagon. Rubble mixed with the bones and ashes, the lost hopes and dreams of thousands. I quake at the thought of preaching to such dry bones.

This wasn’t a job for a rookie prophet or preacher. This took courage and faith. I remember one of my mentors and dear friend, Lewis McAdow telling me about his first church. He was prepared to set the world on fire and was excited to be sent out by the seminary for his new church. That first Sunday he came loaded for bear. When he stepped off the bus a lady and her three small children were there to pick him up and take him to the church. They drove out of the city. They drove quite a way. Finally they came to an abandoned church. She stopped and together, she, her children, and Dr. McAdow pried the boards off the front door and went inside. No one else showed up. But they had Sunday School and worship. Afterwards the lady took him back to the bus. The next morning he went in to see the Dean. His gifts for ministry would be completely wasted at that sad little church. He demanded to know

why the dean had sent him there. The dean looked over his glasses and drawled, "Lewis, I decided that if you were going to kill a church it might as well be one that was already dead."

Some people would have wallowed in anger or pity. Not Lewis. He preached to the dried bones a sermon about life. By the time he left seminary that congregation had 70 active members. That dead church was reborn!

Ezekiel stands tall and prophesizes to the bones and soon there is a strange quaking and a rattling. From the scriptures we cannot tell if the earth itself quakes, causing the bones to rattle, or if the supernatural rattling of the bones is so mighty that it causes the earth itself to quake.

What we do know is what Ezekiel tells us, that sinews appear and bind bone to bone, and then the flesh appears upon the sinews, and next the skin covers it all. Sort of like that gory scene in the "Indiana Jones Raiders of the Lost Ark" movie - but in reverse.

So the valley is now filled with unmoving bodies. And the Lord says to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to the breath, 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." With fear and trembling Ezekiel preached to the corpses. And so it was that the army of dried bones stood up and saluted.

The people with whom Ezekiel shared this vision, a people who had lost their war and ended up carted off into captivity in a foreign land, were amazed at what God and some fine preaching could do. But neither God nor Ezekiel were finished!

Ezekiel continued to preach, saying, "Then [God] said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' "

Those bones did not represent a defeated army! They represented a people who were so sad, so lost, so far from home, so hopeless that they were spiritually dying. They did not see anyway home and they were dying, being picked clean by the vultures of a foreign culture, and being bleached white by the hostile intensity of their captivity. They were dead men and women walking numbly from duty to duty, with no life left in them.

Some of you people know what that feels like. You've been through hell.

If the rest of you want to know about what it was like to be with the people in exile:

- Ask the widow of a person who died in Oklahoma City when the Federal Building was bombed.
- Ask the person who was on the phone with a loved one in the World Trade Center when the steel melted and the building collapsed and the phone went dead.
- Ask the person whose son or daughter was lost when a terrorist bomb went off under a US convoy in Iraq.

Think now closer to home!

- Ask the person whose spouse gets Alzheimer's and no longer recognizes them anymore.
- Ask the person whose only child dies suddenly of a brain tumor.
- Ask the person whose entire family was killed by a drunk driver.
- Ask the person whose beloved spouse of 50 years dies.

For some, their hearts and mouths are just as filled with ashes and despair as the skies of New York after the towers fell. While their bodies still move there is no life in their heart and their eyes no longer twinkle. And when they walk - you can almost hear the rattling of dry bones.

This vision is for them. It is a reminder that with God all things are possible!

God tells the Israelites, no matter that their marrow is dried up and their spirits bleached and their hopes are and dreams are broken and scattered among countless other broken dreams and hopes - God will heal them, pull them back together even on a cellular level, raise them up, and breath back into them the breath of life - the same breath that he breathed into Adam.

If God can breathe life into a valley full of dried bones, then surely God...

- Can heal a heart crushed by death or despair.
- Give hope to soldiers going out on convoy against cowardly enemies.
- breathe new life into a church or denomination
- And can lead the blind out of the dark.

God can...not only part the Red Sea but can God can breathe life into your life!

Then God told Ezekiel, "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.

How wonderful! God did not demand faith before service – God saved the exiles so that they would see and believe that God would act on their behalf. In moments of great personal despair God will not demand payment up front (like a toll booth collector) – but can extend you a moment of grace so that you will KNOW that the Lord will act on your behalf because God loves you even before you are loveable.

Yes, yes, there are some scriptures that tell us that some things do take faith before you can claim them – but Ezekiel tells us clearly that God's saving love will not leave you crumpled and desolate in some ditch beside the road until you say the magic words or pray the magic prayer. God's love will come so that you may see – God's love for you – and from then on your faith will need to take the lead.

CONCLUSION

Speaking of seeing – from now on, whenever I see a mountainous pile of bones my first thought will still be – of meaty BBQ ribs, well smoked, served by the slab and shared with good friends – but my second thought will be that this is a sign of God's love for us, of resurrection and redemption – and I will rejoice and be glad that God cares enough to raise the dead, to mend the broken, and to breathe life into the desolate. Praise God for His love!