

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Martin Eden

The Day of Pentecost
Saturday, May 18, 2024, at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, May 19, 2024, at 9:00 a.m.

“I Will Put My Spirit Within You and You Shall Live”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

One of the temptations we have when reading the Old Testament is that the Old Testament seems so far removed from us and seems so far removed from the cross and empty grave of Jesus – as if it is a different book.

We find this vision of Ezekiel of the valley of dry bones (now, unlike some of the other visions of Ezekiel, this is one seems somewhat comprehensible and straight forward), and we find at the very heart of this vision: Christ Himself.

That should never surprise us. As Luther has often been quoted as saying, “You can cut the Bible on any page and it will bleed the blood of Christ.”

When we talk about this vision, we generally do so as a stand-alone story or vignette. But this is part of a greater message of warning and comfort for the Jews who have been taken in exile to Babylon. In Ezekiel’s words leading up to this vision of the valley of dry bones, we hear words of warning; we hear words of promise; we hear that Israel will die for their sin because they broke the covenant with God and in their arrogance were saying, “Abraham was one man and God gave him all the land to possess. We are many; certainly God will give us the land to possess [Eze. 33:24]” – all the while falsely imagining that they will receive the benefits of God’s promise to Abraham without having the faith of Abraham which was credited to him as righteousness.

God had given the land to Abraham to possess forever – and we see evidence of that to this day. When I turn on the news and see the nation of Israel, the descendants of Abraham, possessing the land promised to Abraham, it is just one more assurance that God will keep His promises. There is no other ethnic group of people who have been scattered across the face of the earth who have maintained an identity to a homeland – especially an ethnic group which was completely separated from their homeland for such a long time. For over 1800 years, it seemed as if God’s promise to Abraham had not been kept.

Following the years of Exile in Babylon, most of the Jews did not return to Israel. Many stayed in Babylon, and many more scattered throughout the world. This is known as the Diaspora – the dispersion of the Jews.

However, many of them did return to Israel – Jerusalem in particular, under the leadership of Ezra and Nehemiah. Israel was then a predominately Jewish nation for about 600 years until the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem in 70 AD when the Zealots rebelled against Rome – and the Temple was burned and historians record a river of gold flowing out of the Temple, which the Romans happily took with them along with the other spoils of Israel and used that wealth to fund the building of the Colosseum under Emperor Vespasian. And many people scattered.

Then in the years 132-136 AD, a Pharisee named Simon Bar-Kokhba led a rebellion and historians record the Romans killing about 580,000 Jews – and many more died of starvation and disease. There would have been literal valleys of bones. From this point forward, there are very few children of Abraham in Israel – and none in Jerusalem because the Romans would not allow any Jew to enter the city. Jerusalem becomes a predominantly Christian city and remains that way for 1000 years.

In Ezekiel 36 God speaks of how He has scattered the children of Abraham across the face of the earth because of their unfaithfulness. He compares their actions to “filthy rags,” an image St. Paul also uses. But, the Lord says, “for the sake of My Name” which He put on the House of Israel forever (as we talked about last week), He says, “I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land [Eze. 36:24].” When I look at the political goings-on with the presence of the nation of Israel, you cannot help but see God’s promise to Abraham continuing to be fulfilled even though the multitude of the children of Abraham do not share the faith of Abraham – and the fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham found in Christ.

God continues to speak through Ezekiel and offers a greater promise than possession of a piece of land. The Lord says, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. . . I will give you a new heart . . .and I will put my Spirit within you [Eze. 36:25-27].

And then, Ezekiel writes, “the hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out in the Spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of the valley; it was full of bones.” And He said, “Son of man, can these bones live?” These bones are the whole house of Israel. The life that is breathed into those bones is not the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. The life that is breathed into those dead, dry bones comes from Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord has already said, “I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean” and now “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” By the way, the Hebrew word for “breath” is the same word for “wind” and is also the same word for “Spirit.” The same is true in Greek. The Spirit breaths into you the breath of life, and you shall live.

But not just have life and breath here on earth. Oh no, the promise is much greater. The Lord says, “And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live.”

The promise is all about the resurrection. This is all about what Christ has done. When the Spirit of Truth, the Comforter promised comes, it is all about Jesus and what He has done. In our reading from Acts, we hear about the Holy Spirit filling the disciples and they spoke the Gospel in a multitude of languages, but next week, we hear the message they were proclaiming.

“Men of Israel, this Jesus whom you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men, God raised Him up because it was not possible for death to hold Him.” And that is only how Peter starts his sermon. It is all about Jesus. It is all about the promise of the resurrection – and a little bit about Baptism.

When we read the words of Ezekiel and his vision of the valley of dry bones, it is all about Jesus. It is all about the promise of the resurrection – and a little bit about Baptism, because Baptism is all about Jesus too. The works of the people are filthy rags. There is no reason that these dead scattered bones should expect life. There is no reason that the Jews in Jerusalem on Pentecost should expect forgiveness or salvation when they crucified the Holy One of God.

Yet, Peter will say, “Repent and be baptized.” The Lord says through Ezekiel, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness. . . I will give you a new heart . . .and I will put my Spirit within you.”

“And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live. Then you will know that I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will do it, declares the Lord.” Amen.