

5/19/2024

Confirmation Sunday

Ezekiel 37:1-14

If you're familiar with Whitewater, you likely know that the three cemeteries in Whitewater form a perfect isosceles triangle, which is a little creepy- as if cemeteries weren't unnerving enough. Cemeteries have this eerie power to them, don't they? If you take a walk through a cemetery, it seems like everything gets quieter, you get a bit uptight in cemeteries- on the flip side, I think that's why teenagers often sneak into cemeteries at night when they want to feel rebellious and daring and brave- no one sneaks into the Culver's parking lot- they sneak into cemeteries. Why? Why do cemeteries have this odd, sobering, unnerving power? *The bones*. You can't see them, but you know they're there. Dead bodies that used to walk, talk, eat, sleep, work, laugh, and now lie dead and there's something sobering about that because it forces you to face the reality: That's going to be you someday.

Ezekiel is given a similar experience in a vision from God- except the bones in the cemetery he goes to aren't underground marked by expensive tombstones with their names- they are strewn everywhere- not even dead bodies, or even skeletons, but bones that have been dead so long that they've gotten dusty and dry and scattered- what used to be a nation- millions of people now lie dead, dry, dusty, disturbing bones. But God shows Ezekiel this vision for a purpose- he has a job to do, the theme for today: **“Prophesy to these bones.”** Really? Yes! Speak the Word of God to these bones and something is going to happen. God is going to work, a miracle is going to happen, something is going to change, and life is going to appear- even among the dead, dusty, dry, decaying valley of bones- prophesy to these bones! And this challenge, and this promise is given to **1. Ezekiel, 2. The Apostles, and 3. You.**

1. Ezekiel was a prophet who served Israel during the time when the people of Israel weren't actually in Israel- they were in Babylon- in exile about 600 years before Jesus walked the earth. Up to this point, God had done everything for Israel- freed them from Egyptian slavery, sustained them for 40 years through the desert, given them their land, given them their national identity, given them prophets and priests and their religious system, everything they had, they had gotten from God- so when they turned away from God and worshiped all the false gods of their neighbors, they lost what God had given them- and God warned them! If they continued to give themselves over to drunkenness, sexual immorality- which was what foreign god worship consisted of, scamming and abusing the poor and widow, God would discipline them! They didn't listen- so God used the Babylonian Empire to come and destroy Jerusalem and take their people into exile refugee camps in Babylon- modern day Iraq, and what used to be a powerful, beautiful, wealthy nation was now a raggedy, dusty, dead group of people- and Ezekiel's job was to tell these people: “This is your fault! You did this! This is how God is waking you up from your spiritual deadness!”

And what's what they were- and they had *just* realized it. The “valley” that Ezekiel is brought to is filled with a nation of dead bones- and notice how Ezekiel emphasizes the dryness of the bones- dry bones

that were very dry- these bones weren't just dead- they had been dead for years, decades, centuries! The deadness of Israel began after King Solomon died and the kings of Israel stopped caring about the truth of God's Word and justice and peace- and they had been dead for a long time. These bones were long dead- which makes what God does next so fascinating- God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel knows that dead bones don't live, but he also knew God can do all things, so he says, "LORD, you know." And God tells Ezekiel to do something ridiculous- "Prophecy to the bones. And tell them to come alive" What's that going to do? Ezekiel doesn't ask, he just does it- he proclaims God's Word over these dead dry bones- and something happens. Not all at once- see how deliberate Ezekiel is? First, the rumbling, then the bones come together, then the tendons and ligaments, then the skin, but they're not alive yet- they need breath, they need the Spirit, so Ezekiel calls upon God to give breath and now, alive is this grand nation of people. God makes it clear- this is Israel. Israel is in exile, and they are about to experience cultural and national death- in a few generations they are going to be absorbed into the Babylonian people and God's promises to their people and the hope that they have is gone. But God says, "no- I'm going to bring you back into your land, and you will be my people." And God did- because as God says, he doesn't just talk- he acts, he does. God declares it, God does it- through the Word that Ezekiel preached.

2. The Apostles. Fast forward 600 years, and the people of Israel still were in their land, still worshiped at the temple, still kept their Jewish customs, but they were still, in many ways, spiritually dead- they looked alive like those dead bodies in the valley, but they were just as spiritually dead as they were when God let them get exiled. During Jesus day, the religious leaders of God's people mostly fell into two camps: The Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Pharisees you likely know about- they loved all of God's rules so much that they added to God's rules and convinced themselves that they could earn God's favor by being extra obedient to his Law, and they were hypocrites- they really didn't love and trust God, they loved and trusted themselves and used God's rules to make themselves feel holy. The Sadducees were somehow worse, not only were they just as holier-than-thou as the Pharisees, they didn't even believe or listen to a huge chunk of God's Word. They didn't believe the parts of the Bible that talked about angels or demons, or about the time when God is going to raise people from the dead, or heaven or hell- because that conflicted with the Greco-Roman culture of the Roman Empire, and they felt that the philosophical teachings of the Greeks and Romans were more than God's Word. These were the pastors when Jesus came, and when Jesus came- everyone knew he was different- and he was. He wasn't just a prophet or teacher sent from God, but true God come down to live and be what his people couldn't, and to be the ultimate sacrifice whose bloody, gruesome death would give eternal life to those who trust in him. He rises from the grave and proves to his disciples that what he just did was really what the Old Testament was all about- it's always been about Jesus coming, living, dying, rising. And he tells his disciples that he's going to go, but just like he made those bones alive through the word that he gave Ezekiel, he is going to send the Holy Spirit to make people alive through the Word that the disciples preach: That's what Pentecost is: the valley of dry bones, spiritually dead people enslaved by the demands of a Law they can't keep hear what their Scriptures have been telling them the whole time: A sacrifice has to be made for you to be forgiven, and it has been made: Jesus is that sacrifice, trust in him! And the truly miraculous thing that happened on Pentecost wasn't just that the

disciples spoke this and people from different parts of the world heard it in their own tongue, but that they were brought to life and trusted in Jesus- 3000 of them filled- alive.

3. You. And now, 2000 years later, God calls Christians just like he called Ezekiel and the disciples: "Prophesy to these bones!" Jacksyn and Solomon, that was said about you- you know from our time together that human beings do not have the ability to love or trust in Jesus on their own- their hearts are hostile to God- dead in sin- just like the bones in the valley. That was you! And just God through Ezekiel spoke life into those bones, God spoke life into you. When you were baptized into God's name, he declared you to be his perfect, holy, forgiven child and when God speaks it, it becomes true! And through his Word that you've been hearing and learning throughout your lives, God has been shaping you, forming you, strengthening you, sending his Breath, his life, the Holy Spirit- which, by the way, those three things are all one word in Hebrew "Ruach" and Greek "pneuma." Just like God breathed the breath of life into Adam when he created him, just like he send his breath or Spirit of life into the bones and Israel, just the like the breath or Spirit of God entered the listeners of Pentecost, God's breath and Spirit has been entering you these past years- and we saw evidence of that today. Jacksyn and Solomon, as you excellently proved today that you are capable of reading the Scriptures and believe what God teaches. That's not an accident. That doesn't just happen- the Holy Spirit has filled you and given you spiritual life to care about what God says and to understand why it's important. That is what we are confirming today. You are a Christian whom the Holy Spirit has poured life into.

Therefore, 2 things: 1. Stay close to that which gives you life. You notice what gives life to the dry bones- God's Word spoken through Ezekiel- not Ezekiel. We as human beings do not have the capability to keep ourselves spiritually alive- but we do have at our fingertips the thing which God uses to keep us alive and close to him. His Word. Stay close to this. To be frank, if I honestly had any notion that today would be the last time I'd see you in this building, I wouldn't confirm you. I'm confident that you value and love and cherish this Word and will continue to read it, study it, listen to it, and submit your thoughts, words, and actions to it- because this is your life source. God creates and sustains your life through his Word- today is not a graduation. Let me say that again. Today is not your graduation- it is the first day of your life as a young Christian adult and member of the army brought to life in the Valley of Bones. 2- God brings bones to life to be soldiers, not spectators. As you both excellently pointed out, American Christianity is dying, and much of it is dead. Not only are more and more people walking away from the Christian faith, but those who consider themselves Christian openly reject many basic teachings and moral rules that God gives us in his Word- like the Saducees, about half of young Christians accept what God says in his Word until it starts to contradict their culture. God wants young Christians to be different. We need young Christians to be soldiers, not spectators. Here's what I mean. We don't need more Christians who only go to church when it's convenient and fits into their schedule and only believe the parts of the Bible that agree with what they think is right and sensible. We don't need more Christians who only open their bibles, pray, and grow in the faith once a week, if that. We don't need more Christian men who only go to church because their wives make them. We need young Christians who love the Word, who love to grow in their faith, who love to use their gifts to serve others, who love their non Christian family and friends to have hard, sticky, controversial conversations about

Jesus and are willing to get rejected if they say, “you should come to church with me some time.” We need young Christians who love God’s Word so much that they would come and hear it even if their parents don’t. We need young Christians who are okay with the idea that they may have to suffer for what they know is true, and are willing to do so because Jesus is that good. We need more young Christians who are willing to be counter-cultural, active, love-filled, humbled-by the Gospel of Jesus. That’s what God has called you to be, and that is what he will make you so then you can find dry bones and prophesy to them. Amen.