

March 29, 2020

SCRIPTURES

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Intro: Ezekial was born into a Jewish priestly family. He, along with other Jewish political and religious leaders, was taken from Jerusalem into exile into Babylon about 600 years before Jesus was born. Following the fall of Jerusalem, Ezekial was commissioned as a prophet to his people. In this chapter God directs Ezekial to speak to the exiled Jewish people and shows Ezekial a vision of restoration. The image here of a valley of dry bones may literally reflect the results of a battle in Mesopotamia or simply refer to the demoralized and defeated and exiled Jewish people of that time or both.

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 round 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, 'Prophesy to these bones,
and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.

[Pronunciation note: “prophesy” is pronounced “prof eh sigh” not “prof eh see.” It is “prophecy” that is pronounced “prof eh see.”]

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,
'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.'
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 prophesy, 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.'

HERE ENDS OUR READING FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT.

Romans 8:6-11

Intro: The Bible consistently treats the body, the soul, and the spirit as closely inter-related and good, since they were either created by God or proceed from God. This text seems to suggest that Paul had a different view, opposing flesh and spirit. However, Paul is using the word “flesh” as a technical term that does not refer primarily to such physical acts as sex or eating, but rather to our tendency to be disobedient to God’s commandments.

Paul uses the word “flesh” to refer those times in our life when we separate ourselves from God, when humanity is without God’s grace, when we think and act as if we can successfully live our lives without God. In this season of Lent, it is worthwhile to listen carefully to Paul’s words, warning us to submit to God’s Holy Spirit, instead of insisting on our own way without attention to God’s word and grace. Paul wants us to develop a mind that pays attention to the transformative power of the Spirit rather than the deadening effect trying to go it alone.

Romans 8:6-11

To set the mind on the flesh is death,
but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.
For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh
is hostile to God;
it does not submit to God's law—
indeed it cannot,
and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh;
you are in the Spirit,
since the Spirit of God dwells in you.
Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ
does not belong to him.
But if Christ is in you,
though the body is dead because of sin,
the Spirit is life because of righteousness.
If the Spirit of him
who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you,
he who raised Christ from the dead
will give life to your mortal bodies
also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD
FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD.
THANKS BE TO GOD!

SERMON “The Spirit Is Life”
Rev. Dr. Alan Baughcum
Sheepscot Community Church

3-29-20, Ezekial 37:1-14, Romans 8:6-11

I went to Wesley Theological Seminary, a good Methodist institution. It is located in Washington DC. The seminary required that each person seeking a Master of Divinity degree must complete a two-week immersion in a culture different from our own. There were a variety of immersion opportunities.

For example, one of my friends went off to Breezewood, PA for her two weeks. I do not know if Sheepscot has a town slogan or not. Some towns do. Well, people refer to Breezewood as, I swear I am not making this up, “A Town of Motels.” For those of us who lived in points in and near DC, Breezewood was the place where we got on the Pennsylvania Turnpike for points west. And, yes, it was literally full of truck stops, motels, and fast food places.

My seminary friend spent her two weeks hanging out in a ministry established in a truck stop, counseling truckers who needed a shoulder to cry on, offering a friendly ear to listen, and, sometimes, providing some actual religious information.

Others of my friends went on immersions organized by the seminary in poor communities in the Dominican Republic, Haiti, the American Southwest, and even South Africa. Well, when it came time for my immersion trip, it happened that my wife was already scheduled to attend a conference of therapists and counselors in Maui, one of the islands of Hawaii. For those of you who have read the book Hawaii by James Michener, you already know where this is going. You know that the destination of the very first Congregational missionaries from New England was to the town of Lahaina on... yes... the island of Maui.

Tough duty, but someone had to do it!!

Lahaina was seen by the missionaries as a very wicked place, its people having been corrupted by sailors on whaling ships that put into Lahaina after very long stretches of time at sea. The missionaries wanted to redeem the native Hawaiians who, as they saw it, had fallen into very unchristian practices. And they were naked, and unbothered!

And so, I contacted the Conference Minister of the UCC in Hawaii. He put me in touch with Rev. Donald Schmidt, then the pastor of the very church in Lahaina that those first congregational ministers constructed -- Waiola UCC. The Waiola Church was a wonderful place, full of generous and loving people, with a worship liturgy that featured wonderful Hawaiian music and language.

Don structured an immersion experience that taught me a lot about the native Hawaiian population that remained on Maui and on their political and economic and social difficulties. I spent a lot of time talking with public officials and with business people and religious folks and lay people in UCC churches not only on Maui, but also on the nearby islands of Lanai'i and

Molokai'i. I learned a lot about the history of the Hawaiian people and saw a good bit of geography.

There is a very special place on Maui that I want to talk about. Maybe you have specific geographic places where your soul more readily experiences the presence of God ... Well, one of those special places for me is the 'Iao (pronounced "Yo") Valley in the northwest part of the island of Maui.

The 'Iao Valley is a beautiful place. It is wonderfully cool and green, surrounded by the walls of an old volcano and watered by streams and rainfall of more than 355 inches a year. The valley leads the visitor to the 'Iao Needle, a 1200-foot tall structure formed by erosion of wind and water.

For many years the 'Iao Valley was a burial place for the Hawaiian nobility. Hawaiian royalty and nobles were called ali'i (pronounced "ah lee ee). Hawaiian culture was based on the notion of rule by royal families. When Maui ali'i died, many were buried in secret places in the hillsides of the 'Iao Valley.

Not only was the valley a graveyard, it was also the site of a very famous battle — well, at any rate, famous in Hawaii. In 1790, not long before the Congregational missionaries arrived, King Kamehameha I defeated the army of the Maui king. The battle resulted in Kamehameha unifying the islands under one ruler for the first time in Hawaii's history. It was said that the fallen Maui soldiers were so numerous that their bodies literally dammed the waters of the valley streams and that the river ran red with blood all the way to the ocean.

How can a place where humans have visited such horror on one another now be a place of such spiritual connection to God? I don't know. Perhaps others here have had an experience similar to the one I'm describing at a battlefield site — perhaps a Civil War battlefield like Gettysburg or Antietam, or a WWII battlefield like Omaha Beach. It seems that God is able to touch and renew the human spirit even in places of great violence and death. All I know is that I felt the Spirit of God in that place and that, at a moment in my immersion experience when I felt down and disheartened, God lifted me up in that valley of the 'Iao Mountains.

Of course we don't have to be on the site of a battlefield to feel God's presence. We can commune with God in places where beauty has not been touched by violence. My wife and I sang Christmas carols in Hawaiian in the church in the small village of Hana, very much a church of New England design. We communed with God as we snorkeled and swam with a sea turtle in Hawaiian waters.

Ezekial's vision, a vision as if seen through the eyes of God, also used a battlefield image to give hope to the dispersed and despairing people of Judea. They had been defeated. The seat of their religion, the temple, had been destroyed, and their capital city was gone. They were away from their homeland and separated from one another in a strange and alien culture. Ezekial prophesied, spoke on behalf of the God of Israel, to these hopeless people that the Spirit of God was sufficient. The dry bones of their dead dreams and aspirations would be brought back to life

and restored by the power of God. The dead places in their hearts and lives would live again. God was still their God and they were still God's people.

Paul's words to the church at Rome makes the same point some six hundred years later — a different time and a different locale — but the same point. “The Spirit is life...”
“The Spirit is life...”

By emphasizing Spirit, Paul is not saying that our physical, fleshly bodies are bad. We know, and Paul knew, from Genesis that what God has created is very good. When Paul uses the word “flesh,” he means that we are relying on our devices, our own plans, our own ambitions without seeking out what God intends for us. If our mind is set on the flesh, as Paul understands it, there is just no room in us for the Spirit to lead us and to inspire us and to strengthen us to do God's will. The Spirit that is in us, if we will only allow it to enter, is full of God's righteousness and will lead us into the ways of life as God intended.

The words of Ezekial and of Paul are all about life coming from death. Only God can do that. God operates through the Holy Spirit. Jesus sent God's Holy Spirit to be with us now that he sits at God's right hand in heaven, intervening for us and praying for us with sighs too deep for words. Jesus' resurrection was from death to life eternal, a hope that we hold because of Jesus' going first. Paul and Ezekial were preaching life, restored human life, coming out of deathly and deadly experiences.

The Holy Spirit is available to us to bring life from death ... all over this planet ... today, on March 29, 2020 and hereafter.

Nor is resurrection purely a spiritual experience ... it can be physical as well. When, praise God, someone who is addicted to drugs, be they opioids or alcohol or nicotine, when someone is able with the help of medical science and loving support from family and friends and church is able to overcome ... surely that is both a spiritual and a physical miracle that should be cause for all of us to rejoice. Praise God!

Drug deaths now outnumber deaths from traffic accidents by two to one. Can you imagine?! We need to pray for the help of the Holy Spirit and to work for the application of society's resources to reduce those deaths even as we have made our highways safer over the years.

Similarly, we need to work to prevent all the deaths that come from hunger and famine. Those deaths are preventable. The earth yields an abundance of food ... thanks to hard work and the application of reason and science to the agricultural arts. We have enough food. The only reason that anyone dies from famine now is because those in control cause it and prevent its relief. Often the first thing that happens in famines is restrictions on those who report the news or active efforts to present false news. If the world knows that famine is happening, everyone springs to attention, brings pressure to bear, and delivers relief aid to prevent death and feed the hungry.

In the same way now with the Coronavirus, it is key that we know the truth. We need to know the truth about the disease, how to recognize its symptoms, how to avoid encountering it, and how to treat it and mitigate its effects.

We also need to know the truth that the virus is not the only thing going on in the world. We have other diseases and illnesses that need attention. We have to make sure that life can go forward even as we pay attention to and treat especially those most vulnerable to the virus ... the elderly and those with health conditions that increase the risk of death. I used to be an economist and I assure you that there are health dangers that increase when the economy goes into a recession or, God forbid, a depression. [See, for example, <https://www.pnas.org/content/115/13/3296>.] Somehow, we have to figure out a way to mitigate the medical problem without exacerbating it with health problems stemming from economic decline. Somehow, we have to do both, a very difficult balancing act indeed. May God grant us the wisdom to do that in a timely and loving way to do it well!

And finally, another truth ... joining with Ezekial and Paul, I say to you that we need the Holy Spirit ... in addition to all the physical and economic and medical safeguards ... we need the Spirit. I write to you today to tell you that the Spirit is willing and available. It goes, like the wind, where it will go.

Let us take a moment and slowly breathe into ourselves the breath of God, the Holy Spirit, which spills out to us from the Godhead of the Three-in-One. Let us slowly breathe it in! Let it fill us, ... not just down to our neck... let it fill our lungs... not just our lungs... let it fill our abdomen... let it fill our stomach, lungs and throat... let it fill all of our body that can receive it. And now let us breathe out the Spirit that has taken up residence in us. Even as the Holy Trinity has sent us God's Spirit, Christ's Spirit, ... let us breathe it out as we received it, as a gift ... and share it as we are able with all of God's creation. Let the Spirit fill us and dwell within us. Let us accept God's gift deep within us, filling us. And let us share the gift of the Spirit-filled life now and forever with all of God's good Creation. Amen.