

Inspiration
or
The Valley Full of Dry Bones

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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Our lesson today is a beautiful *parable* about spiritual life. It is a story full of natural imagery that represents spiritual things, and so not just a renewal of *natural* life as it would seem literally, but a renewal of *spiritual* life, in fact the gift and reception of spiritual life for the first time. We begin with the general scene or setting of the vision Ezekiel saw – a *valley* full of dry bones.

In the Word high and low places correspond to high and low states in our spiritual lives. If, for example, we read about a valley - like “the valley of the shadow of death” in the 23rd Psalm - we can be pretty sure that it represents a low, worldly or depressed state of mind. By contrast any high place, like a mountain or hill, usually represents an elevated state of mind, one of those states when we feel “uplifted” or even “high” about something. Of course if it’s a selfish “high,” such as might be represented by the Tower of Babel or a mountain that gets in the way, it may suggest some form of arrogance or “superior” attitude that can get in the way of true love and understanding. So Isaiah said, “Prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every *valley* shall be exalted (i.e., lifted up), and every *mountain* and *hill* shall be made low; and the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places smooth; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed...” (Is. 40:3-5).

It is certainly interesting, and significant, that in this prophecy the first thing that happens after we “prepare the way of the Lord” is that “Every valley shall be exalted.” Then, after that, “every mountain and hill shall be made low.” Next “the crooked places shall be made straight,” and finally “the rough places (shall be made) smooth.” Before we engage in the process of spiritual growth we are in a spiritual wilderness. Our thoughts are low and mean, typically worldly and self-centred. But when we prepare a way for the Lord one of the first things He does for us is lift us out of this depressing state. He lifts our spirits by raising our thoughts to a higher plane. He helps us to recognize the value of the spiritual things that He provides no matter what our natural circumstances may be. He makes us feel better. And so the valleys are exalted. Then, after that, He helps us remove – or at least reduce – our concerns about ourselves: our pride, self-centredness, conceit, the superior attitudes that actually are a part of being in the wilderness and that contribute, by contrast, to our feelings of depression. The mountains and hills are made low.

Finally the crooked places can be made straight and the rough places smooth. But that’s another story for another time.

Today, in our lesson from Ezekiel, we read about a valley full of dry bones. It was, we read, an “open valley,” possibly suggesting a desert, as the bones were “very many” and “very dry.” And the Lord God was said to have asked, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Later on in the lesson we read that the bones were “the whole house of Israel,” so it clearly is a simple metaphor showing Israel devoid of life and therefore lacking anything of vital integrity. Yet the Lord confirmed in the vision that the bones could live, that is, they could be brought together again, restored to health, given flesh and skin, and filled with the spirit of the Lord. In other words, the people of the house of Israel could be inspired again to live in goodness and in truth if they would hear the Word of the Lord.

But what does all this mean for us? Let’s look again. The valley is the sad state in which we find ourselves before we turn to the Lord – or after we have turned away from Him. It is a desolate state: dry, barren, wasted; the sort of state we’re in when all we care about is ourselves or the things we want, and we don’t seem to have any real delight in life. So much is missing, so much is lacking, so much of what we experience is dry and hard, we feel broken, brittle, disconnected, uninspired, most likely unappreciated and, as it said in the lesson, hopeless.

The bones in the vision obviously are lifeless bodies. But again, all natural things in Scripture represent spiritual things, and so bodies represent minds – our minds – the fleshy parts our will and affections, the bony parts our understanding and thoughts. Specifically, then, the bones in this vision are the bits and pieces of knowledge that we have in the thinking parts of our minds. But they are facts or insights devoid of life, that is, they have no loving purpose within them, and they serve no charitable use. Our thinking from them is hard, mean, inflexible and often irrational (though it may not seem that way to us). And it’s important to realize that these ideas may even be formed of knowledge from the Word or other genuine truth, but again, they are held for selfish reasons rather than for any higher use. So there isn’t any spiritual life in them.

Now of course living bones, living facts, ideas and insights are essential for spiritual life as they form a structure from which and upon which our loves and affections can act. Furthermore living bone *marrow* is where vital red blood cells are manufactured for the whole body. So the truth, when it has this goodness within it, not only nurtures the body but provides it with great power, as we can see in the tremendous leverage produced by muscles pulling on the bones of our arms, legs, hands or feet. So in the vision the Lord told the prophet to address the bones, saying, “O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord!” And when he did so “there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over....”

I guess we all know the old black American spiritual about this prophecy: – about the hip bone connected to the thigh bone, the thigh bone connected to the knee bone, and so on. For most people that song has been a celebration of what they supposed would be a physical resurrection after death, when the graves would all be opened and the good people’s bodies would be reassembled and given new life while the evil people’s would be completely destroyed. Given, however, that it’s not really about physical resurrection, but the restoration of spiritual life, it is even more interesting and important to see what all the “noise” and “rattling” is about.

In the spiritual sense of the Word, noise generally has to do with truth, that is, the “voice” of truth being “heard” in the will and understanding. But where there is a clattering or dissonance in the sound we may understand a sort of *clashing* or *conflict* of ideas in the mind as disconnected thoughts come together under the influence of a new attitude or spirit. The term for “rattling” actually means shaking, and in the spiritual sense shaking represents the state of mind when we are agitated by conflicting ideas. We even speak about a person being “rattled” or “shaken” when he or she reacts strongly to some startling news or information. The point is, change, even intellectual change, is hard for us and may arouse some agitation within us. Certainly, as we receive new life from the Lord our old ways of thinking are disturbed and shaken.

But when our thoughts become settled and we start to make new connections, ordering and organizing our ideas in keeping with the Word, then the nerves or sinews and the flesh of new loves

and affections can be added to the mental structure that is taking shape, and the skin of new habits and expressions drawn from spiritual love and wisdom can provide a protective envelope within which these things can function. So a whole new person may be formed, and yet... without the breath of life we cannot stand.

So what is this breath? In Hebrew, in fact in all the original languages of revelation, terms for wind, breath and spirit are the same, or at least they come from the same root words. So in various translations of Ezekiel’s prophecy we read “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath...” or “Prophecy to the spirit, prophesy, son of man, and say to the spirit...” or “Prophecy to the wind, prophesy son of man, and say to the wind: ‘Thus says the Lord....’” Obviously on a physical level, however you describe it this refers to the breath of air that fills the lungs, flowing in through the mouth or nose. It is the same thing that the Lord “breathed” into the first man in the Garden of Eden to give him life, and it is the same thing He “breathed” on His disciples after the resurrection when He said, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (John 20:22). The Psalmist also mentioned it when he wrote about all the things the Lord created, saying, “You take away their *breath*, they die and return to their dust. You send forth Your *spirit*, and they are created...” (Psalm 104:29-30). Again the words for breath and spirit in Hebrew are the same.

But what is the spirit in the spiritual sense? Of course, it is the spirit of truth, that is, the life of faith in the will and understanding. Just as breath or air fills the lungs so the spirit of truth fills the understanding and we get wisdom – not just rational or intellectual ideas but real inspiration. ***And here is the critical point:*** to prophesy in the name of the Lord is to speak or teach the truth of His Word. And the truth of the Lord’s Word is that the dry, brittle bones of our miserable, disconnected, memorized thoughts of what is right and wrong CAN be brought together and connected into a marvelous, inter-related *working* order that allows them to be affected by good, moved by love and dedicated to useful service. Our lifeless literal knowledge even of the teachings of the church can be inspired and revitalized by the Lord.

But how is this prophecy received? If the bones are dead, just lying scattered around on the valley floor, how can they hear the Word of the Lord? How can they respond? How can our scattered and disconnected bits of knowledge and information receive life from the Lord? Well, of course, they can’t – by themselves. But with encouragement and regular exposure to the Word, in due course some of the pieces can start to come together: this idea can be connected to another idea, that thought to another thought. Still, it only happens under the influence of *doctrinal* instruction! If the prophet doesn’t speak, the bones don’t come together. Why should they? How can they? There is so much to learn, our spiritual life is so complicated, so intricately fashioned, and the Lord’s Word is so deep and comprehensive that it may take years to get our thoughts fully integrated and our minds fully functioning with all the different elements engaged.

But as the pieces do come together – click... click... click – the process gains momentum and at some point the whole valley of our worldly, sensual perspective gets rattled and shaken as new muscles and guts – new loves, new feelings – grow. There is a period of turmoil as we adjust to the new reality, the new perspective, and then the skin – the new attitude of behaviour – takes hold and wraps our new insights in protective layers of external life and habits.

And yet, we read, there’s still no breath in these bodies! The pieces are all there; the knowledge and affection are present; but there’s still no joy, no real sense of spiritual life from the Lord. So,

finally, the prophet speaks to the wind itself, commanding it to fill this army with life. And it does. And what this means is that now, at last, we are really *affected by the truth* and inspired by it so that we don’t just know it, and we don’t just love it; we begin to think FROM it instead of just ABOUT it; in short we start to *live* according to it.

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh,” the Lord says, referring to the flesh as our old loves and attitudes, “and that which is born of the spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the spirit” (John 3:6-8).

How do we get the full impact of this *spirit* of truth, the perceptive wisdom that comes only from the Lord and fills our minds with hope and confidence and joyfulness and possibilities? It’s hard to say! After all it’s not something we can get for ourselves. But if we are willing humbly to expose ourselves, with all our selfishness and limitations, to the strong teaching and influence of the Word, acknowledging our powerlessness and our need, surely the Lord will inspire us with His love and a genuine, spiritual wisdom will follow.

For the truth is that we are made in the image and likeness of God. The truth is that we are wonderfully and intricately formed in His Divine Providence, each one of us for a specific use among others and a corresponding feeling of fulfillment when we realize that use. The truth is that the Lord is in and with us every moment of every day patiently and yet urgently encouraging us to hear His Word, to feel His presence, to breathe in the fresh air of His wisdom as it relates to all our thoughts and actions. And the truth is we can hear the “sound” of this wisdom flowing in. All we have to do is listen. Listen and think. Think and do. Do and enjoy the feeling of fulfillment that flows from Him and makes life worthwhile.

The spirit of the Lord, the breath of His life, the wind of change that blows against our old ways of thinking, this is the inspiration we get when we are open to the teaching of the Word and receive its influx in a life according to it. This is the means of our being truly “born again,” born, as the Greek says, “from above,” standing strong, raised up out of the valley of our depressing, disconnected, misleading worldly and self-centred ideas.

“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” They are a graphic representation of all our own interior states before we turn to the Lord, or after we have turned from Him. But the good news is that they can be restored to life. And they will be restored to life as we hear the teaching and renew our commitment to receive it in heart and mind.

- Amen

Lessons: Ezekiel 37:1-14
Children’s talk about flesh and bones – goodness and truth.
John 14 & 16: selections
Apocalypse Explained #418:3 & 419:3