

## **LIFE IN THE SPIRIT: THE MANY**

**EZEKIEL 37:1-14**

**JUNE 8, 2003, PENTECOST/CONFIRMATION/NEW MEMBERS**

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Here we are in early June. Cool weather has let the blossoms linger. Plentiful rain has made things lush. This time of year we celebrate Pentecost. The coming of Holy Spirit. Signs of new life are appropriate...but they can also deceive.

You see, what the Holy Spirit does is, it defeats death. It defeats negativity.

It defeats fear. It defeats defeat. The Holy Spirit resurrects, renews, restores.

So while we are looking at those beautiful blossoms and that green earth we are wise to remember that new life springs from death of winter, from decaying organic materials that enrich the earth.

What I am saying is that you cannot talk about life without also talking about death.

Biologically or theologically. The Holy Spirit and death are partners in a great tango.

Today is confirmation and new member Sunday. What a happy day, you say, why does he have to mention death? Here's my goal in this sermon: I want to open us to receive the Holy Spirit. If everything is just fine we have no need of the Spirit. One member of the church in the midst of his own journey recently said, "I am staring death in the eye. The door of the furnace is open. I see the flames."

Unless we open the door of the furnace, unless we stare death in the eye we will not receive the Spirit.

This is why God led Ezekiel into the valley of dry bones. God's people died marching into exile years before. If ever there is a graphic picture of massive death this is it. Maybe you have visited the allied graves in Normandy, field after field, row after row of Christian Crosses and Stars of David – over the graves of soldiers who died in WWII.

God takes Ezekiel to this vast cemetery, if you will, and begins a dialogue with the prophet. It is a dialogue I invite us to have with God today.

God says to Ezekiel, "can these bones live O man?"

Maybe you are in some far off country this morning like Ezekiel. Maybe a health or career or relationship problem are your death valley. Some institutions in our city and nation live in a culture of death. A state fiscal oversight board may soon be running our city because annual deficits are killing us.

My men's book group had a lively discussion a few nights ago. We read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. Talking about race relations we got to talking about the struggle of other peoples. There were Jew, Irish, Armenian, and Muslim among us. Each with a story of struggle, each standing on the plain of dry bones where the hopes and dreams of his people were dashed.

When God brings Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones and asks, "can these bones live O prophet?" This is an important question because depending on how Ezekiel and you and I answer will determine if the Holy Spirit will be able to bring life to the situation.

Do you remember Ezekiel's answer? He says, "Only you know O Lord, only you know." In other words, Ezekiel says, "I don't have any answers or explanations God. Only your knowledge is sufficient to answer that question."

Sometimes we face problems so big and perplexing that we have to surrender and say, "only you know what to do here, O God." An anorexic teenager. A young widow. The story says we have to surrender to God so God can take over.

I can tell you this past year we raised more annual dollars than ever before because the leaders of this church surrendered. Our elders said, "we trust God's vision for this church. We believe this is what God wants us to do. Let's present it to the congregation and see what happens." They did and the annual giving went up by 28%. Miraculous. We surrendered ourselves.

I don't mean to be flip or simplistic. But here is the process: God says, "can this city live O mortal? Can this church live? Can this family survive? Will this marriage make it? Can we beat the cancer? Will that young person straighten out?"

And our reply is, "Only you have the answer O God, only you know. I don't know God, you know. I am taking my orders from you."

Immediately after Ezekiel says to God "only you know" God tells Ezekiel what to do. God says, "preach to the dry bones, tell them I am going to open the graves, raise them up, give them life and bring them home."

I can guarantee there is no way Ezekiel would have preached to those dry bones if he had not surrendered. What a foolish thing. Standing there in the middle of death valley, all by himself, saying the bones will live! Can you imagine if anyone saw him exhorting bones in the desert. "Watch out for old Ezekiel. Got a little too much sun! The guy is nuts!"

Sometimes God asks us to do absurd things. You can't do something foolish, something that looks silly or seems ludicrous if you haven't first surrendered. Here goes Kevin Gaughan again, middle name must be Ezekiel. He's preaching to the dry bones of Buffalo. He's got us going to another conversation. He's got us thinking about our future. He's telling us there's a chance we can work things out, a chance for better life here in Western New York if we work across municipal lines with a bigger vision.

The Holy Spirit can fill you and empower you but you have to be empty first. You have to surrender. You have to let go. You have to put your valley of death in God's hands. You have to say, "OK Lord you are in charge now. Your will be done." When our family enrolled in the Hyde School a few years ago that's what we did. We said, "we are out of answers, God. We need your answers now."

I am not talking about shirking responsibility. That's not what God wants. I am talking about becoming a dance partner with the Lord. Learning to let the Spirit of God guide your steps and lead you, lead us to new life.

But that's not all. Did you notice? Once we surrender, once we say we will follow God's orders, God uses us to be a part of the solution. God tells Ezekiel to preach.

God needs Ezekiel. God uses Ezekiel as an instrument for change, an instrument for healing, an instrument of Holy Spirit.

What I am saying this morning is that each one of us is called to preach to the dry bones – what ever those dry bones may be in our home or school or place of work. We are called to preach to lifeless situations no matter how absurd it looks or silly it seems.

Each one of us – new members and veteran members, confirmation class and clergy – are called to preach to the valley of dry bones. Called to say that God is going to raise them up, give them life and bring them home again.

And the issue we have to face today as well as the reality of the death that surrounds us is our fear of surrendering to the power that takes us out of control and puts God in charge. Until that happens death will reign.

On the day of Pentecost the book of Acts says the Holy Spirit came like a mighty wind.

It came with tongues of fire and touched the heads of the followers of Jesus.

They began speaking in many different languages and all of those who were in the Holy City from the four corners of the earth understood them, and the church was born.

You can't preach to a culture of death, you can't open the door of the furnace, you can't announce life to dry bones unless you surrender yourself to God, let God's Spirit fill you and give you the words to say.

The Day of Pentecost – the birthday of the church is when we remember that each one of us is called to face the death in our world, to stand amidst the brokenness of our time and announce the words of life God gives us to speak.

I can't tell you what those words are for your situation. Only God can do that. But I assure you God will tell you what to say when you lay down your ego, admit your inability to defeat death all by yourself and listen for the wind of the Spirit.

I can't imagine a more important time for us to take to heart – all of us – the message of Pentecost than right now in Buffalo. I can't imagine a more important moment in history than this start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to say to the dead, dry bones, "Rise up, live, come home!" Amen.