

The historical background to our reading plays an enormous part in understanding our reading.

The people of the southern kingdom Judah did not listen to God and chose to serve other gods - Despite all the warnings from God's chosen prophets.

The people of Judah thought that with the temple in Jerusalem, they are safe. God is living in his temple on the hill of Zion and surely God will not allow his temple to be destroyed.

So in the years between 598/7 to 581 before Christ, the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and totally destroyed the city which included the Holy Temple. They took all the leaders and skilled craftsmen as exiles to Babylon in three stages and only left the people they could not use. Economically, Judah was on its knees, and politically they were facing an identity crisis. Their faith was shattered and they did not know how to face their uncertain future. The people of Judah - those who were in exiled and those who stayed behind - had to learn to trust God.

The prophet Ezekiel were also exiled and from exile he prophesizes about their current position and future. In chapters 1 to 24 he warns the people of Judah of the coming tragedy, in chapters 25-32 he prophecies against the nations, in chapters 33-39 he tries to build up the exiles as the people of God by proclaiming the salvation of God and in chapters 40 to 48 he gives a vision of their future.

In Chapter 37 the prophet Ezekiel finds himself transformed by the Holy Spirit to a valley of dry bones. He is led on an inspection tour of the site by the Spirit, and given a close-up view of the horrendous extent of death. The question put to Ezekiel—"can these bones live?"—is followed by Ezekiel's response—"O Sovereign Lord, you alone know."

In these fourteen verses the Hebrew word *rûah* that can be translated as "breath" "wind" "Spirit" occurs no fewer than ten times. In verse 1 the

word refers to the Spirit of the Lord which transports and inspires Ezekiel. In verses 5, 6, 8, 9, and 10 *rûah* is rendered as “breath,” that is, the life-giving breath from the Lord. In verse 11 the plural of *rûah* occurs, designating the four “winds” of heaven. Finally, in verse 12 *rûah* refers to God’s Spirit as the life-giving Spirit. Although the metaphor is used for the first time, this is not the first place Ezekiel has spoken of the restoration of God’s people to their land.

Ezekiel has a vision in which he is transported to the middle of a valley full of dry bones. The Lord tells him to prophesy to the bones and to tell them they would become covered with flesh and come to life. He does so, and while he is prophesying, the bones come together with a rattle. Flesh, sinews and skin cover them, but they are still dead. He is then told to command the wind to blow on the bodies. When he does so, breath enters them and they become alive—an immense army (9–10). The Lord explains to him: “These bones represent Israel, who say that their hope has dried up” (11).

Ezekiel had to proclaim to all the people of Israel that they must have hope again because God’s Spirit can perform a miracle beyond their wildest imagination. He will bring the people of Judah out of their graves and restore them as a UNITED nation again. They will then know that He is the Almighty God (verses 12–13), who will put his Spirit in them and settle them in their land. They will know that He is the God who is always true to His word (verse 14).

MP 67

Breathe on me, breath of God

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 3:

“He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

I do not think we can ever imagine the hopelessness and despair that the people of Judah felt. As a nation they were broken. Families were divided.

The foundation of their faith in God was shaken. The temple on the hill of Zion in Jerusalem was destroyed. There was really nothing to hope for. Now wonder they sang:

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

² There on the poplars
we hung our harps,

³ for there our captors asked us for songs,
our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

⁴ How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?

⁵ If I forget you, Jerusalem,
may my right hand forget its skill.

⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not consider Jerusalem
my highest joy.

And then, amidst all this despair and hopelessness Ezekiel are transformed by God’s Spirit to a valley of dry bones. Actually bones of dead people. Can you imagine how real this vision must have been to the exiled people living in Babylon? They saw the destruction and the deaths of many of their relatives. And now they were exiled and felt deserted by God. Everything they believed in was gone. They felt like dead people just like the skeletons in the vision who has been “cut off” or “deserted” and without any hope.

But Ezekiel and the people of Judah had to learn a very important lesson. Nothing is over, until the Lord God decided it is over! God always has the last say! God promised them new hope and new life and in the year 539 the exiled people of Judah could return to their own country.

I think we can learn the same lesson. We might think that a bad situation can never be resolved. We might think that a broken relationship can never

be mended again. We might think that hopeless situation can never be turned around. We might think that nothing good can come from a tragedy. To us humans situations can seem to be impossible to resolve but for God anything is possible. He is the Almighty God and He showed us all a long time ago what He can do.

It is remarkable that on Calvary, the place of the skull, the symbol of hopelessness and despair that God through the crucifixion of Jesus, gave us the hope of new life in Him. The place of death became the place of life for all the believers. The place of despair and hopelessness were turned into a place of hope and love. God mended the broken relationship that existed between Him and us.

And after Jesus was resurrected and ascended to heaven, when again the early believers felt alone and desperate, God send His Holy Spirit. God gave all the believers indeed the chance to be “awakened by His Holy Spirit”. Each and every believer can have the assurance that God is near through His Holy Spirit.

God have taken away the despair and hopelessness that sin, death and hell caused. He indeed showed all of us in a BIG way that nothing is over, until He decides it is over.

And this must be our consolation, when we feel that the life has gone out of our relationships, when we feel no hope and no spark of joy, when we feel overcome by our circumstances, when we feel desperate and without help, let down by others and when we are tempted to despair...

The question that God asked Ezekiel along time ago must be our question as well during this journey of Lent. Can God make the dry bones into living bones? Can He change any bad situation into a good one? Can He change despair into hope? Off course he can. God, and God alone has the final say!

So if we find ourselves on our journey to Jerusalem, dreading for what is still to come, may we never forget about the hope of the resurrected Jesus who is waiting in Galilee.

Let us pray:

We praise you, Lord Jesus, for blessing us
with the promise of hope that no despair can overcome;
for calling us out of the tombs of our past mistakes
into the light of new possibilities;
for breathing life into our weakness
and blessing us with fresh strength.
We praise you, Lord Jesus, now and for ever. Amen.