

# Fifth Sunday in Lent

## CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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## Analysis by Eric W. Evers

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. 2He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. 3He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know." 4Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. 5Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. 6I 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." 7So 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. 8I 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. 9Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, 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." 10I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11Then 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.' 12Therefore prophecy, 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. 13And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 14I 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.

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## **DIAGNOSIS: The Question Keeps Getting Worse...**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *We're Dying***

"These bones are the whole house of Israel" (v. 11). We, the people of God, are not spectators in this drama. We are participants. The people of God are the dead bones. And is that so hard to swallow? Working ourselves "to the bone" and "to death," pouring ourselves into addictive pursuits of entertainment and excessive consumption, obsessing over the superficial while letting the essential slip us by... We're exhausted, we're malnourished (spiritually, although the health of our physical eating isn't much better), and we're shallow. So isn't this metaphor of dry bones great for us? It is so evocative, so relevant to our situation.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *No, We're Dead***

So we might ask: "Can these bones live?" And that would be a good question, a hopeful question. It would, in fact, be a tremendously positive question, showing an ability to see beyond our current limits and struggles, if only we were the ones to ask it. But we're not. The Lord asks it. He puts the ball in our court: "Can these bones (and these bones are you!) live again?" And this is where we realize that we've been missing the point. We aren't really participants in this drama, after all. We're scenery. We really are the dead bones. This isn't a metaphor! It's reality! Granted, it's an eschatological reality, but that

makes it all the more compelling. Yes, Israel can make its complaint to the Lord; yes, Ezekiel can hear the question from God. But the dead can't resuscitate themselves, and the same is true for us. The walls of our cultural valley (both secular and ecclesiastical) hold dry, fallen bones. We can work harder, we can work smarter. But it's not getting any better, is it? Can these bones live again? Not if it's up to us.

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Worse, We Are Slain***

So how did this come to be? You have to read closely for this one. "Breathe upon these slain" (v. 9), the Lord tells Ezekiel—these "slain"?! You mean, these bones are not dead and dry of natural causes? We didn't just wear ourselves down on our own? Oh no. And a close reading also provides an autopsy: "We are cut off completely" (v. 11). That's "divine passive" language. It's God talk. The Lord has done this! This valley of dry desolation, this place and pit of death, was made, and filled, by God. All of our strivings and labors aren't merely deluded and self-destructive; they are offensive to the Lord of heaven and earth. Our self-absorption, our pride, our shallowness, our lack of fear and trust in God: for these, we are struck down.

## **PROGNOSIS: The Question Gets Answered**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Life Breathed Back in***

Can these bones live again? Yes! This is what God has done in Christ Jesus. "I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people... I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live" (vv. 12, 14). Ezekiel's words and vision look forward to the return from exile, but point also to a deeper end to the separation that haunts God's people. Resurrection, new creation, new life, the Holy Spirit pouring into enemies of God and making them co-conspirators with the

Father, this is what the crucified Lord, Jesus, has done for sinners! The great gulf of our sins has been bridged by the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross, and the gift of new life has been given to us, dead as we were in our trespasses.

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Put Back Together***

And we will do well to note that Christ is not a “bare bones” solution. Bones come together, then are connected with sinews, adorned with flesh, and covered by skin. Lives are reassembled. Embodied life is affirmed and reconstituted in Christ. Our fractured, shallow, disconnected and inwardly-curved lives are given new form, new shape, new focus, new connectedness. When sins that left us dead in the valley are forgiven, when the power of death reigning over us has been broken by the resurrection glory of Jesus, we are not lifted into some gnostic nirvana of holy separation; together we are brought to new life in the old world, but this life really is new! What the world had torn apart, God heals and repairs. These bones live, and their fully fleshed-out life is a witness to the wholeness of Christ’s creative work.

**Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Made Bold to Prophecy***

And it is as re-created, re-formed New Adams and Eves that we now occupy a new role in the story. “Prophecy to these bones,” the Lord says, but now it is addressed to us, as it had been to Ezekiel. We still see the desolate valleys and the dry, dead existence of those around us. We are placed “on [our] own soil,” in a particular time and place, here to serve neighbor and bear witness to what the Lord alone can do: give new life to the dead. The hope that has been given in Christ is ours, but not ours to hoard. It is ours to give, freely, by proclaiming Jesus as the crucified and resurrected Son of God and Savior of the world. Mere words Well, words, certainly. But as Ezekiel shows

us, words spoken under the authority of the Lord can raise the dead. We have some speaking to do!