

Opening Prayer

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

^{37:1} 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. ² He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³ He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴ Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵ Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶ 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." ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ Then 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." ¹⁰ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. ¹¹ 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.' ¹² Therefore 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. ¹³ And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴ 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.

Commentary

The function of prophecy at this crucial moment in Israel's history is epitomized by this passage explaining the estranged, then mended, relationship between God and humanity. When we are lost and cut off from the land of the living, God can "open our graves" (37:13) and bring us back to life. Ezekiel's mission was threefold: (1) the opening of the graves signified the awakening of a politically and religiously dead people to renewed national and spiritual life; (2) the covenantal clause, to "put my spirit within you" (37:14), anticipated a higher moral and spiritual life than the nation had previously possessed; (3) the promise of land, "your own soil," provided new hope to God's people. They would return home at last. Lent can be a time of spiritual

dryness when we are called to examine our hearts, repent of the sin that has caused it, and look forward to the new vitality of Easter. God can breathe life into our spirits and move us from a “weariness in well doing” to a renewed commitment to active discipleship.

Reflection

Name some situations in your life or church or our society that are comparable to a valley of dry bones. What caused the dryness or death? Has it been restored? Why or why not? To what do you attribute the change?

Romans 8:6-11

^{8:6} To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law – indeed cannot, ⁸ and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ 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.

Commentary

Several centuries later, Paul contends that the children of God are still in the same state as those in Ezekiel's time, though God's spirit remains available to bring about restoration and renewal. Paul tells the Romans that, through the vivifying power of the Holy Spirit, there is a way to a new and better life. Opening one's mind to the Spirit of the resurrected Christ represents a new beginning, transforming all thought and action from self-centered to God-centered.

Reflection

This passage does not mean that our bodies and desires are unacceptable to God, but rather that when we focus on ourselves, we leave God out. From this standpoint, how is it with our souls? With what are we preoccupied that keeps us from fulfilling God's purpose for our lives?

John 11:1-45

^{11:1} Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ² Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³ So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴ But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵ Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶ after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days

longer in the place where he was.⁷ Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again."⁸ The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?"⁹ Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world."¹⁰ But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them."¹¹ After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him."¹² The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right."¹³ Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep.¹⁴ Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead."¹⁵ For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him."¹⁶ Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."¹⁷ When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days.¹⁸ Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away,¹⁹ and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother.²⁰ When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home.²¹ Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."²² But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him."²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again."²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live,²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world."²⁸ When she had said this, she went back and called her sister Mary, and told her privately, "The Teacher is here and is calling for you."²⁹ And when she heard it, she got up quickly and went to him.³⁰ Now Jesus had not yet come to the village but was still at the place where Martha had met him.³¹ The Jews who were with her in the house, consoling her, saw Mary get up quickly and go out. They followed her because they thought that she was going to the tomb to weep there.³² When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."³³ When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved.³⁴ He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see."³⁵ Jesus began to weep.³⁶ So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"³⁷ But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"³⁸ Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it.³⁹ Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days."⁴⁰ Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"⁴¹ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me.⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me."⁴³ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!"⁴⁴ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."⁴⁵ Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

Commentary

The raising of Lazarus marked a turning point in the ministry of Jesus. This last sign was a double-edged event that brought many persons to belief but also launched the plot to kill Jesus (11:45-53). From that moment, Jesus curtailed his travel. He retreated to Ephraim (11:54), spent another week in Bethany (12:1), then headed to Jerusalem for his last days. (12:12) John highlights the way Jesus made his message known with signs—the first his changing water into wine, the last the raising of Lazarus. Jesus was life incarnate and brought life to all he encountered. Every human contact up to the point of raising Lazarus included offering persons a fuller, more wholesome, more joy-filled life, though not everyone was willing to accept it.

Reflection

From your perspective, what was the purpose of raising Lazarus? What does this event mean to us today?

Responsive Psalter

Psalm 130

130:1 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.
2 Lord, hear my voice!
**Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!**
3 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
Lord, who could stand?
4 **But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.**
5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits,
and in his word I hope;
6 **my soul waits for the Lord
more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.**
7 O Israel, hope in the LORD!
For with the LORD there is steadfast love,
and with him is great power to redeem.
8 **It is he who will redeem Israel
from all its iniquities.**

Closing Prayer

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.**