Ezekiel 37:1-14  
These Dry Bones

For me each sermon is different, and I have a different way to get into each text, different questions I want to ask to try to understand it. So in this passage, when the Lord asks Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” my first thought was, “Of course they can, or the story wouldn’t be here.” And I am thinking that Ezekiel must want to answer in somewhat the same way, but his reply seems cautious or ambivalent or evasive, as though he doesn’t want to answer. But Ezekiel was not cautious or ambivalent, and his answer here displays a frame of mind that acknowledges God has a purpose, though the prophet may not yet understand it. I think Ezekiel is satisfied that God will do what God will do, at the time that God chooses and for reasons that will glorify the name of the Lord. But until God explains, the only answer is, “Lord, you know.” The scripture does give us God’s reason for the miracle, that God is recreating his people Israel, bringing the people out of their tombs, out of their hopelessness, and giving them the Spirit of life, bringing them home again out of exile in Babylon and into the land of promise; and these things must happen in this way so that the nation will know that God has done this great deed; it is no accomplishment of their own, nothing they have made happen by
their own wisdom or religious fervor or morality or even by their own suffering.

Only the Lord could do this, as great a thing as raising up dry bones.

I tried to picture this scene in my mind’s eye, all these bones lying about on the ground. They had been there a long time, dried out and bleached white by the hot sun. I wondered how they got there and who they were. I thought of a wagon train or a caravan attacked and looted, and all the dead bodies left to the elements; wondered if they might have been victims of war or ethnic cleansing as by Hitler’s SS or by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, or like Stalin’s purges in Soviet Russia, or the slaughter of the Kurds in Iraq, or the warfare in Rwanda between the Hutus and the Tutsis. Were these bones left from tribal or political or religious hatred, or were they victims of the ravages of nature- tornadoes that may have blown through- like the storms that tore apart so much of the Deep South this past week-killing hundreds, and the bodies remaining where they fell when the winds died out; or if a great flood deposited these dead bodies on the desolate plain, or if a volcano erupted and the population was destroyed by the poisonous fumes that came out of the center of the earth? Maybe they were an entire army utterly defeated by a superior force, or a civilization wiped out by disease, or perhaps they had overworked the land until it no longer brought forth and the nation starved, and
all that was left were their dry bones upon the barren earth. Perhaps they were
victims of greed, the collateral of business-as-usual; that these were the bodies that
had fallen because their employer had not taken proper safety measures, like the
fires that burned those who couldn’t escape, as at the oil refinery in Texas City a
few years ago, or the Triangle shirt factory in New York in 1911; or perhaps a
corporate carelessness like the invisible poison leaking out of a chemical plant in
Bhopal, India in 1984 that killed 7,000 people.

People die, and civilizations die, so that all that is left is bones, but Ezekiel
wants to be certain that we know that only God can make persons and nations
alive, and that only God can make right the evil we sometimes do to one another;
wants to be sure that we remember- whether we are victims or perpetrators- that
God alone can restore health and life and hope and create community. It happens
only by God’s word and by God’s power.

We may read this story and be awed by the power of God. Just as we
probably are amazed when we think about the resurrection of Jesus on that Easter
long ago, or read the biblical accounts of God’s mighty acts, the plagues of Egypt,
dividing the sea for Israel to pass through, providing water from the rock and food
in the wilderness for the wandering people, making the sun stand still in the sky so
that Joshua could defeat his enemies, tearing down the walls of Jericho; or when we think about the miracles of Jesus, the Great Physician curing diseases and madness, giving sight to the blind, the wonder-worker calming the storm on the sea of Galilee, feeding the 5,000, raising Lazarus from the dead. So we may read this miracle too, and be impressed. But that’s only half the story of what God has done. Yes, God is powerful; that’s easy enough. If we believe in God, then we believe that in some way God made the earth and the oceans, the moon and the stars and planets, and all living things; we may believe that God did this exactly as the Bible says, or we may think that God created in some other way. But we still confess our faith in God Almighty who rules over creation. But does God do these great things just because he can; is God just showing off? What is God’s purpose here, and what is the meaning of that statement in verse 14, “Then you shall know that I have done it”? We must be careful not to make God a braggart or a bully lest we ourselves become those things.

God is able to raise dry bones and make them alive because God is powerful. But the reason God raises them is because God loves. We should read this story not just for the wow factor, but in the context of God calling out to his people, washing them and making them whole in chapter 36, and in the second half of
chapter 37, healing their disagreements and divisions, and uniting them in the
protection of a strong shepherd and king. Here is the maker of worlds and
universes who bothers with dead bones, who concerns himself with forgiveness
and the suffering of his creatures. So the purpose of that seeming self-satisfied
phrase of God, “I have done this,” is so that we will know what kind of God we are
dealing with here: it is a God who loves those who are hurt, who calls out to the
lost, who repairs and heals what is broken, a God who is faithful and remembers
the covenant made long ago which guarantees God’s love and abiding presence
among us, a God who creates community and friendships, a God of such
compassion that he vows, “I will bring you home.” A God who desires such
intimate relationship that he says, “I will put my Spirit within you,” with such a
radical concept of closeness that we will know God has breathed his life into us,
that with our every breath God’s joy and love and kindness enter us in order that
we become more and more God’s man or God’s woman, God’s people, so that we
may share God’s thoughts and God’s attitude toward others.

In the scripture, God commands Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and because of
the prophesying the bones are raised and breath comes into them. Now, prophecy
is another word for preaching. And I apologize that it may seem a long time since you heard the kind of preaching that can revive dry bones - I try my best - but it is important for me and for you to recognize that Ezekiel’s preaching does just that.

It is not just the talent or the dynamism of the speaker, though; it is rather the willingness of both the speaker and the hearer to permit God’s word to act. For all of us to believe and to listen for God’s grace that comes to us in a word of mercy, and in the humble actions of God’s people who welcome each one into the family God has called into existence.

It is important for me to remember that God’s word comes in the study of scripture, and also in the daily connection with God and in my relationship with each of you. It is important for you to think of preaching as God’s mercy and command to you, spoken through my abilities and also through my weaknesses. 

*God’s holiness comes to us in strange ways, and almost always through our humanity - on person to another.* With that mindset then, even the least of us can speak the word of God that gives life; even the least of us can act in the selfless ways that display forgiveness and love. All of us “least ones,” remembering that God has done it - and not we ourselves, then become the “redeemed community,”
as one author has put it, created and enlivened by God’s Spirit, sharing the hope that never fails us, and the love that will never desert us.