

Hopeless vs. Hope-filled

5th Sun in Lent – 03/26/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 11-12 “...these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are indeed cut off.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, ...Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel.”

Introduction

⌘ Hopelessness; despair – these are feelings and struggles that many of us know far too well. In Psalm 22:14, King David said in despair, “All my bones are out of joint”. In Isaiah 38:13, Hezekiah lamented, “like a lion He breaks all my bones.” And Habakkuk also declared, “rotteness enters into my bones” (Hab. 3:16).

➔ Have you ever said it; even if it was only a thought or a whisper when no one else was around? We’re not talking about frustration over the ordinary aches and pains of arthritis or a consistently difficult neighbor or boss or family member here. No, we’re talking about utter hopelessness, as the people of Israel after years of captivity in Babylon cried out: “Our bones are dried up and our hope is lost” (v 11). I’m sure some of us here in this room have felt that way before; maybe you even feel it right now.

⌘ All is lost; there is no hope; no use in trying to find a way out of this pit of despair. The valley of “very dry” bones in every direction certainly becomes a reality for any, and all of us when we are deep in the depths of grief and depression and despair.

➔ But dear Christians, from out of that valley of death and hopelessness Ezekiel declares God’s promise of great hope; of new life; of a fresh, reviving breath of eternal energy and joy, as He answers His own question to Ezekiel in verse three, “Can these bones live?” Ezekiel was none committal, turning the question back to God, “O Lord Yahweh, You know” (v.3). But God’s answer was, and is absolute and clear, “Yes, dry bones can live! Yes, there is hope for us all!

I. Our Answer in Hopelessness

⌘ But let’s be honest with each other, friends. Even more, let’s be honest with ourselves. This is not the answer many of us would give when we are deep in the throes of hopelessness, is it?

➔ God is clear in verse 11, these “very dry”, long-dead bones “are the whole house of Israel”. In other words, God says that this valley filled with dried up, dead bones are His perfect description of the true state of His people. That’s the believers in Ezekiel’s day and the believers in our day right now!

⌘ For those in Ezekiel’s day, the picture is bleak indeed. God tells us that He has heard their three-fold cry of despair in verse 11: #1) “Our bones are dried up”; we might as well be dead, because this life of captivity and servitude is not the life that we want. It’s not fulfilling. It’s not fun. We might as well be dead.

➔ #2) “our hope is lost”; these believers have already heard God’s judgment pronounced against them because they had turned away from Him and worshipped idols and themselves. Earlier in chapter 7:6-7 Yahweh told them, “The end has come; ... doom has come to you.” Yet, even in their unfaithfulness they were taking God’s rightful judgement to heart; thinking that all hope was lost.

➔ #3) “we are clean cut off”; they knew that God’s holy mountain had been ransacked when the Babylonians attacked. Jerusalem and the temple were completely destroyed. They had been

completely torn away from the Promised Land. So, all of the earthly evidence pointed to a clean break from God. God's "chosen people" had obviously been "cut off" from God. They could see the result of their sin. They had enough of a thread of faith still to know that without God, everything is truly hopeless.

✘ When you and I look at our lives today, it's awfully easy to find ourselves nodding in agreement and understanding with our ancestors' three-fold cry of despair and hopelessness at times, isn't it?

→ We look at circumstances in the world around us and we see so much evil, immorality and crime; yet another school shooting this week in Denver; violent crime has increased 32% in Colorado in the last 10 years (FBI Uniform Crime Reports).

→ Grocery prices and overall inflation makes it a challenge just to put food on the table and clothes on our backs. The general sanity within our culture and among our politicians, leaders and throughout the population is barely present, if at all.

→ But worst of all is the extreme increase of utter disregard for God's teaching in the Bible, for involvement and commitment to the mission and ministry of His Church; for even understanding the need and importance of having a saving faith in Jesus for salvation and eternal life.

✘ Like the believers in Ezekiel's day, not only have our neighbors and loved ones turned away from God to worship idols, friends we all must honestly confess that we too have forsaken our God every day – in more ways than we can even think of listing right now.

→ So just ask yourself, what is it that you personally have placed before God in importance? What is your reason for not opening His Word each day or not plugging into Bible Study with other believers or not helping your parents or your children or your neighbor in their time of need? Whatever, those reasons are, they are most likely the cause or connection to the despair and hopelessness that you face. Yes, "our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; (and) we are clean cut off" from our gracious and all-powerful God because of our sin-filled idolatry; because of our own self-serving and miss-guided decisions and priorities.

→ Despair is a sneaky tool of Satan. He loves to needle us; to prompt us; to guilt us with our own guilt until it seems like there is no way out of that vicious cycle of committing that one or two or three sins that we just can't seem to stop doing or thinking about. Then we question God, "Is there any forgiveness left for me?" "Am I beyond hope?"

→ On top of that, there are all of the circumstances that truly are beyond our control; that come into our lives simply because human sin has so deeply corrupted this world in which we live. And those events often pile on the hopelessness as well. A loved one dies. A severe illness strikes. A relationship suddenly ends. Is there any hope?

✘ And we look in the mirror and we ask God's question of ourselves, "Can these (dry) bones live?" (v.3)

II. God's Answer is Yes!

✘ In the end, my fellow believers in Christ, our answer to that question doesn't matter. Because God has long ago given His answer to the question. And it is a resounding "Yes"!

→ He actually gave the answer well before He asked it of Ezekiel in front of this valley of dry bones. While the guilt was still fresh within the hearts of Adam and Eve after they had committed the very first sin and introduced the reality of death and dry bones to the human race, the LORD promised that His Son would come to turn our hopelessness into the confident and glorious hope of new life and forgiveness and victory over sin, death and the devil!

- ✘ Adam and Eve didn't deserve to have that hope. Neither did the people of Israel in our text; neither do you and I deserve to have our sin-dried bones of hopelessness restored back to the vitality of life.
 - ➔ But here's the deal. Though we may feel like things are hopeless; though the evidence certainly points to the fact that we should be "cut off" from God, the one fact that has not changed and will never change, regardless of our emotions; regardless of any worldly evidence is this: those people of Israel in exile and we sons and daughters of Israel still today were – and are – still God's holy people; made holy not by anything within us, but entirely by God's gracious will and His power and His promises fulfilled in Jesus.
- ✘ In verse 12 Yahweh gives His three-fold response to the peoples' three-fold cry of despair. He promises, "Behold, (1) I will open your graves and (2) raise you from your graves, O my people. And (3) I will bring you into the land of Israel." And the result of God's promise is what? Verse 13, "And you shall know that I am Yahweh, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O My people."
 - ➔ "O My people" – you see, we may turn our backs on God; we may rattle around in our struggle with sin; in these dried up bags of bones in which we exist here and now, but the LORD – the LORD always remains true to His promises and the richness of His mercy.
 - ✘ As we see in verse four, His Word alone has the power to turn an entire valley of dry bones into a flesh and bone, fully vibrant army of living and breathing believers!
 - ➔ Yes, God's Word is a creating Word and a recreating Word. Just as God created Adam from dust, so He is fully able to recreate Israel from the dried up bones of hopelessness and despair there in our text.
 - ➔ In verse 14 He promises "I will put My Spirit within you and you shall live". No matter the struggles you face; no matter the guilt or the shame or your depth of despair my dear friends, you have God's life-giving and faith-sustaining Spirit active within you through the water and Word of your baptism. So, embrace that power through God's gift of faith and rise up each day in the water of your baptism filled with and dripping with God's assurance of new life and an everlasting hope!
- ✘ Because your hope is based 100% upon Jesus and His reviving work on the cross, done entirely for you!
 - ➔ Jesus is the One in Psalm 22 that cried out from the cross, "My bones are out of joint" (22:14) and "I can count all My bones" (22:17). It was not in a valley, but on a hill called Calvary that Jesus became the dry bones that you and I deserved to be. He took that utter despair and death that should have been ours and He buried the guilt of every one of our sins with Him in His grave for all time. So they need never lead us into despair ever again.
 - ➔ For just as we died with Him on the cross, so also have you and I and all believers of all time been made alive with Jesus in His victory over death! So yes dear Christians, dry bones can live!
- ✘ You see, hopelessness by nature focuses our attention upon those things that we cannot change; things in the past; things that we face at this moment right now today. But hope, by its nature, directs the eyes of our faith forward, into the future where our LORD has given us His promise of a new and vibrant and glorious rebirth into eternal life. In verse 13 He promises, "You shall know that I am Yahweh, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves, O my people."
 - ➔ So, whatever the state of your body and bones might be when Jesus returns, whether they have been in the grave for many years or whether He comes before the end of this very day, He

has already begun the process of our resurrection to new life in His own death on the cross and His burial in the tomb and His glorious resurrection and ascension to prepare our eternal home in heaven.

→ St. Paul actually put words to our hope for the fulfillment of God's promised future for us in Philippians 1:6 when he said, "I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ."

✘ Yes, the Spirit of God fills you all with that very assurance and hope today, doesn't He; that because Jesus has already delivered you from death upon the cross, you have the certainty that He will deliver you safely to your eternal home with Jesus and the Father.

→ In Jesus there is always hope. No matter how deep the valley; no matter how dried-up we may feel, Jesus points us ahead to the certainty of our own resurrection.

→ In Jesus you always have hope! These dry bones not only can live, but they do live, and they will always live in Jesus! Amen.