

“Second Wind” – Ezek 37:1-14 – Mar 9, 2008

What an obscurely familiar passage this text from Ezekiel is, isn't it? It's familiar to many people, because all I have to say is a couple of words – “dry bones”, or perhaps more so, “d'em bones” – and most people immediately think of this passage. But it's also obscure, because even though many, if not most, people instantly recognize this text, I think very few could describe it beyond “the bones came together”. That's unfortunate, because the bones coming together is only the prelude, the first part of Ezekiel's vision. I suspect a significant number of people wouldn't even understand that Ezekiel is describing a vision, and more than a few would even argue that somewhere there was an actual valley that is now bereft of bones.

Perhaps the saddest outcome of not knowing this passage, and the setting in which the vision came to Ezekiel, is to miss the powerful message of grace and mercy from God in it, a message that was originally directed through the prophet to the hurting people of Israel but which also brings comfort and promise to us today.

To fully comprehend the impact of this vision and the powerful message it conveys from God, we must first understand who the prophet was, and the times in which he lived. Now don't let your eyes glaze over – this is not just some exercise in religious history, it is a necessary process that helps us see how a message delivered almost 2,600 years ago is or can be meant for us today as well.

There are seven dates that you should automatically recognize or remember to help you set events in the Old Testament into their proper context. Today we'll simplify things a bit – we're only going to emphasise one of these dates, 586BC.

The year 586BC was absolutely pivotal in the life of people in Judea, for that was the year that the Temple was destroyed in Jerusalem by the occupying forces of the Babylonian Empire. See if you can try and capture a bit of how that event changed in a moment the whole Jewish faith – try to imagine, if you can, how you would feel if Canada had been occupied by a neighbouring Superpower nation, you had been shipped off to somewhere in that nation, say Northern California, and you heard that they had deliberately destroyed – tore down, burned, completely demolished, every church building in Canada. Even if you could imagine how you would feel, you still would not have captured how the Judeans captive by the rivers of Babylon felt – because even if all the church buildings in Canada were destroyed we would still feel a contact with God, we would still have our faith.

It was not so for the captive Judeans in Babylon. They considered the Temple to be, quite literally, God's house. That's where God lived – No. 1 God's Avenue, Jerusalem. And so the destruction of the Temple meant that God had no place to live, and they had no place to meet with God. They sat down by the rivers in Babylon and wept, and wondered how they could sing their songs of faith in a strange land, providing not only inspiration for the “Bony M” but a lament heard through the ages.

Now can you imagine how it must have been to be a priest ministering to people with such sadness? How difficult it must have been to comfort these people, especially if you have been telling them for years that their wayward ways in the faith were cause for alarm?

Ezekiel was such a priest. He must have been one of the leading citizens of Jerusalem, because he was taken with the first wave of captives in 597. Although the captives had some autonomy, were allowed to gather, and could continue some of their religious practices, it is difficult to exaggerate the seriousness of the Exile as a national disaster and a crisis of faith. The Judeans had lost the land promised to their ancestors and granted way back in the time of Joshua. The last of the line of kings that began with David was a captive, first in prison and then at the court of the Babylonian monarch. The temple, where the Lord made his name to dwell, and where his glory was known, lay in ruins.

Ezekiel envisioned defeat as the departure of the glory of the Lord from the Temple. Small wonder that the exiles asked if the history of Yahweh with his people had come to an end.

Our reading, the vision of the valley of dry bones, is the prophetic answer to that question. He begins by telling us that he was taken by the Spirit of the Lord, and a bit like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz he was set down in a very strange place. For Ezekiel it was the middle of a great plain covered with bones, dry bones – human bones. As is so often the case in prophetic vision reports, a dialogue begins within the vision itself between the prophet and God. This is an important signal – we are to pay attention not just to what is seen, but even more to what is said, because what is said is the word of the Lord, a message for his people.

The dialogue is about life and death, and opens with Yahweh's question to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" It would be easy to see Ezekiel as ducking the question with his "only God knows" kind of answer, but his reply "O Lord God, you know" is much more of an acknowledgement of God as the creator, the very source of all life. God then instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and he does, and with a rattling they come together and are covered with all the other essentials, like tendons, flesh and skin. But still they do not live.

This is the part that most people forget – the bones have come together, are covered in flesh, looking for all intents like real people, but still they do not live. They are not yet standing, like a crowd of immobile zombies, but apparently still lying around on the ground. One image that comes to mind, and that may make this unforgettable, is the pictures that are being taken by some famous photographer (although I can't remember his name) – he's the one that rounds up hundreds if not thousands of volunteers to pose naked in public squares in various cities around the world. You may have seen it reported in the media, and gives you a graphic image of what Ezekiel saw in his vision.

The second part that most people forget is that Yahweh then calls for the breath from the four winds, and when it breathes upon the bodies they now live. Recalling that the word used here – ru'ah, which means equally wind, breath, or spirit – might help us remember this crucial part, that through the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God, these people lived.

Then, naturally enough, comes the interpretation. This vision is not just some entertainment for God, nor a way to disturb Ezekiel. It is a message for the people of Israel, and Ezekiel in his role as prophet is tagged to carry that message to them. It must have been a pleasure for him to do so, for it is a message of unqualified good news to those who considered themselves dead. In a message that would also be echoed by another prophet named Isaiah, the people in exile in Babylon heard a message of hope, of revival under and through God. They heard that not only was new life possible with God, it was new life as a gift from God. Revived, re-strengthened, revitalized, the people could face their future once again linked with God.

It would be a different life. Of course they would, and did, return home, and before too many years had passed they rebuilt their lives, and even rebuilt the Temple. But there was a subtle yet powerful difference, since the people realized that God could still be with them even without that one particular building. Of course the Temple would remain the locus if not the focus of Israel's faith and worship until it was torn down again, this time for good, by the Romans in 70AD. But the Judeans had learned that even in exile, even in a foreign land, even without the most important of buildings, the Temple, that God was with them, had not and would not abandon them, and even if they felt like nothing more than a pile of dead, dry bones God not only could and would but did breath life back into them and their faith.

Is it possible that such a specific message, delivered to God's people so long ago and so far away, could have any relevance to God's people today? I'm here to tell you that it's not only possible, it's a reality. The God who would not, did not, abandon his people to remain nothing more than a pile

of old dry bones is still the same God, now and forever, and will not, does not abandon his people today. Our Lord Jesus, who with the power of God in him was, and is still today living proof, having breathed life into Lazarus, and Jairus' daughter, also demonstrated with his resurrection that God is still willing to breathe new life, a second wind so to speak, into His people.

More to the point, this congregation is a living example of such a second Holy wind. Having come through a rough time when it seemed possible that all that would be left was a pile of old, dry bones, new life was indeed breathed into this part of the body of Christ, and the Spirit lives and moves here and continues to breathe new life into us. We don't need to ask whether Ezekiel's vision was real or not, because it is real in us, revived, re-energized, fleshed out with new muscle, vibrant, alive!

The vision ended, but not the message of the vision. The interpretation concludes with a promise, a promise that the people would be brought home into their land, that God's Spirit would be put within them, and they would continue to know that "I the Lord have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord". Had done it indeed – we know how the rest of the story played out, and that the Lord God made good on His promise, that they were brought home.

The vision ended, but not the story of God's constant love. The promise continues to us, as well, through Jesus, one with the Father, who also promised in the Father's name that He would dwell in us in the Holy Spirit, a promise that we have seen fulfilled. The story continues – in which direction, we can't know. What will lie ahead for us as we continue to listen for God's direction through the Holy Spirit – we can't be sure of the details, but we can be sure that the message of God's grace, delivered through Ezekiel and the other prophets, affirmed in the death and resurrection of the Son God sent that we might have life, the message of God's grace continues to give us new life and a second wind as well.

All praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his mercy has given us that new life through His Holy Spirit, one God now and forever.