

Resurrectors! Superpower Warriors!

Sunday, May 23, 2021
St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania
Pastor James Haun

Ezekiel 37:1-14

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

Just a few summers ago the theme of our Vacation Bible School was that of super-heroes and superpowers. It was a wonderful week as children love the super-heroes of cartoon and comic book fame. These super-human crusaders of popular literature live in a universe which is active with forces of good and evil. Death rays and other kinds of harm are being spread by super-human villains, and super-heroes are ever

vigilant in their protection of the universe and the defeating of these villains' schemes. This notion of such a cosmic battle captures the imaginations of the little ones, making it a good theme for a Bible school. As children grow their imaginations become a little less vivid, and notions of such cosmic battles fade—and this a terrible shame. Our sermon text for this Pentecost Sunday is Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones, and it is obvious that the prophet saw the universe as a place of war between forces of good and evil, life and death. Not only that, but Ezekiel presented a vision of *our* place as warriors—super-heroes—in that grand battle! Are you ready to do some cosmic warfare?

Ezekiel's vision begins on a great battlefield, or what once *was* a field of great conflict. This battle was very obviously over, and God's people, the nation of Israel, were defeated completely. All that is to be seen is a valley, not merely full of the dead, but of dry bones! At the time of Ezekiel's vision Israel was living in exile in Babylon. Their homeland had been destroyed, including their beloved city of Jerusalem and the Temple, their center of worship. It is hard for us to grasp the full extent of these exiles' sadness and sense of hopelessness. The prophet's vision was a ghastly scene, and in the face of such horror God posed a question. *He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord God, you know."* The question may have felt like a cruel insult. Of course, dry bones are not going to live! But Ezekiel also knew the power of God, so his answer demonstrated proper honor to the Author of Life. Israel had witnessed a great amount of death through the siege of Jerusalem and the horror of the long journey to Babylon, but the greatest force of death which they were experiencing now was the death of hope. *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.'"* God was well aware of Israel's hopelessness.

Ezekiel was not in the valley of dry bones for long before God began to do a mighty work of resurrection. First there was a restoration of the bones into bodies. *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.* But after this first stage of restoration there were only bodies lying upon the ground. They needed the breath of life, and this was God's next blessing. *I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.* But something was needed greater than physical life. They needed hope, and so God breathed again upon this vast army. *Therefore prophesy, 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.*

Here we find an Old Testament message of death and resurrection. Certainly, Paul had this in mind when many years later he penned his Ephesian letter. *As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the*

ways of this world.... But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:1-2, 4-6) Jesus was the final fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision. The human race was all dead in sin and separated from God, until Jesus came along and raised us up with him in his glorious resurrection! The resurrection has been explained as the Spirit raising Jesus up from death to life, and the Great News is that this same Spirit is raising up believers to be God's people. We have been resurrected and brought back from the grave of sin and death! *Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.*

Some are offended by this kind of language, especially as we hear of our being *dead in sin*. This sounds awfully extreme, and aren't we really good-hearted people who merely need a little direction and encouragement from God? The world sees the Church as only an encouragement society where good people try hard to make each other better. The Bible presents a very different picture. Extreme as it may sound, the Bible tells us that we are *dead in sin*. Adam died when he disobeyed, and we have all been born under that same curse. This may sound harsh but consider our inability to make ourselves pure and righteous like God. We may try as hard as we can and with sincere hearts, but we are unable to attain the standard of righteousness which is fully acceptable to God. We are alienated from the holy God, and that alienation is death. The Good News is that though we were dead in sin, God in Christ has raised us up!

The vision of the valley of the dry bones is about resurrection, and this resurrection is powered by the Holy Spirit, God's breath of life. (Let us remember that in the Hebrew as well as the Greek, *wind, spirit* and *life* are all the same. To be alive is to have breath, and God breathing upon the nation of Israel is the act of giving them life!) Also bear in mind that God's constant command to Ezekiel to speak prophecy to Israel is a divine order for the prophet to breathe on the people. God is doing a mighty work of restoration, and by God's breath the physical bodies of the people of Israel were sustained and their souls found encouragement and life.

Ezekiel 37 presents us with a preview of Pentecost when the Spirit of God would blow over a multitude of God's people and they would become alive. The day of Pentecost began with a mysterious mighty wind which blew upon the apostles, but this was only the beginning. Something much greater was about to happen. The Twelve were soon to go and meet the multitudes which had gathered for the festivities in Jerusalem, and they were about to breathe the breath of life upon them! It may not sound right to speak of mere mortals breathing the breath of life upon others, for we would all be quick to insist that only God can do such an amazing thing. But look again! In Ezekiel's vision of the valley of death we find God frequently commanding him to prophesy to Israel and to speak to the breath, that it would give life to these dry bones. Ezekiel,

like the apostles who would follow years later, were key players in this work of resurrection.

God repeatedly commanded Ezekiel to *prophecy*, and this word may cause us some confusion. To prophesy is to speak a word of prophecy, that is, a word from God. This whole practice is rightly associated with the ancient prophets of Israel, special individuals who were contacted by God and commanded to communicate God's will to the general population. We also think of prophecy as a matter of forecasting the future, and while the prophets occasionally did predict the future, this is not the real heart of prophecy. To speak a prophecy is to speak the mind and will of God, and in our New Testament age this is a work which is not reserved for a very small group. It is a difficult and mysterious study to try to understand just what is meant by prophets and prophecy in the New Testament age. We do know that many were considered prophets in the New Testament Church, and that all believers have spoken many words of prophecy. We have been blessed with the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ, so to speak of Christ and to accurately communicate the biblical message is to prophesy. Have you read your children Bible stories and told them of Jesus' love? Then you have given prophecy! Not only that, but you may also have raised the dead—but I am getting ahead of myself.

Ezekiel, and in a later time the apostles, were given amazing super-powers to give life to a dead world. More wonderful still, we too are given the same Good News of Jesus and the same amazing power. We are people of Pentecost. We are people of God's power and Spirit. Let us hear God's repeated command to prophesy! If I may coin a term, we are to be Resurrectors with Christ and nothing less! We have been given power to share the Good News in the power of the Spirit, and this holy message has the power to raise the dead! Does this sound too wild and do you doubt me? Consider for a moment those people in your life who have inspired and sustained you. We have all been blessed to know people who have a radiant spirit, and their spirits have repeatedly lifted and inspired us. I had a Sunday school teacher in my childhood who seemed to glow in the dark, so great was his love for Christ and the Scriptures! That makes an impression upon a young person, or upon *any* person! These folks are Resurrectors, and they are spreading not only the message of God's life-giving power, but they themselves are vessels of that very power!

Many times, I have done funerals for a family matriarch or patriarch and have heard these family leaders extolled as being little short of super-human, and this praise has often been of a deeply spiritual nature. "Aunt Bess was peaceful no matter what happened. She always had a word of encouragement. She was always singing hymns." Aunt Bess was the one whose faith in Christ held the family up and kept those around her strong and safe. She was a Resurrector! That's the good news, but there is often a sad side to this story. In too many cases the ones who praise Aunt Bess the loudest

can only look to her as a wonderful and extraordinary person but have no idea what the source was for her superpowers. Or perhaps more accurately, they knew the source of her strength and dared not go there themselves. We do well to celebrate our radiant teachers and our Aunt Besses, but we need to do much more. We need to be sure that we have received their superpowers. As they have breathed upon us, we must invite the Spirit of God into our lives, receive the Holy Spirit and become a fellow Resurrector. I know you people, and I have experienced the numerous superpowers which you have received from God. On this day of Pentecost let us realize our mighty powers and do all we can to make ourselves strong in Spirit and prophecy.

Let us breathe the breath of life! We know how to do it. We simply need to do it more. We know how to speak a heartfelt word of encouragement and blessing from God. Some years ago, when my father died, I received several cards from those wishing to offer comfort. With all due respect to the people of Hallmark I must report that cards were beautiful and artistic, and the printed words may have been pleasant, but the powerful cards were those which included even a few written words of blessing penned by a caring sender. These Resurrectors were exerting their superpowers and giving more than encouragement. They were breathing the breath of life!

What a joy it has been to experience the songs and music of this special Sunday. Our music program is returning, and our thirsty souls are finally satisfied. Do you think that the breath of life is in that music? In *know* that it is, and as we sing the songs of Zion, we breathe the breath of life on a dead and dying world! When we dare to speak, even in the simplest ways of God's goodness and love, and we mention the name of Christ, we exert resurrection power. The world may resist, but the power is real.

I am grateful to have been raised in a Church and to have had people around me who could breathe on me the breath of life eternal. I have been raised up through the ministry of Resurrectors, and I pray that as I have joined the ranks of those Resurrectors I may do so with power.

At last year's Community Day Craft Show there was a booth in the park which was selling costumes for children, and I may purchase one of those outfits for my grandson. These were super-hero costumes, complete with a shiny silk helmet and a flowing cape which would do Batman proud. Children love to put on such costumes and to pretend for a moment that they are super-heroes with super-powers. Perhaps I should purchase such costumes for all of us. Oh, I suppose that we would all look quite silly, strutting about in our Superman style clothes, but it might give us a moment to contemplate the genuine super-hero status which we hold as Resurrectors and tellers of the Good News. You see, the universe is in the throes of a terrible battle, dry bones are all around us, and we are so in need of super-warriors.