Prophesy to the Breath

Ezekiel 37:1-14

It’s wonderful to hear what God is doing in New Braunfels, isn’t it? That’s one of the great blessings about being in the Evangelical Presbyterian Church – whenever you go to Presbytery or General Assembly meetings, you get a chance to see God’s Spirit at work, whether it be the Engage 2025 project planting churches in Muslim countries, or the ministry of the GO center, helping to revitalize churches here in America, or in our Presbytery’s three church plants. We EPC folks are all about evangelism and missions, so much so that ministers from other denominations keep seeking us out to partner with them in efforts to reach the lost.

But when we turn our eyes to our own area, to our own congregation, it’s easy to think that God has passed us by. We don’t have the explosive population growth some areas have – Claiborne County lost over 18% of its population between 2000 and 2010, and the Census bureau estimates we are still losing over 4% per year. With only a little over 9000 people in the whole county, how in the world can we ever expect our little church to grow?

Ezekiel probably felt this way as God showed him that terrible vision – a valley full of bones. What could he possibly do to help all those people? They were not only dead – they had been dead a long time, so long that even their bones had dried out. What could possibly bring them back to life?

So, what a relief it must have been for God to give Ezekiel something to do! God told him to prophesy, to preach, to proclaim God’s Word to all those dead, dry bones. And as he spoke, the miraculous occurred. The bones reassembled themselves, and flesh grew over them. God’s Word proved itself to be what we read in our Responsive Reading – living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, profitable for teaching and reproof and rebuke.

And that’s what Evangelists like Brett do, right? They go where the lost people are and prophesy – they speak the Word of God. And it would be very easy for us to draw the essentially correct conclusion that we need to do the same thing, to get busy about the proclamation part of ministry.

But isn’t that already being done, at least to some extent? There are already over 60 churches of all different denominations scattered throughout Claiborne County. And even though all of those congregations don’t gather for worship every Sunday, every single person in this county has at least one place of worship within easy driving, or even walking distance. Moreover, every single American has access to countless radio broadcasts, televised worship services, and now webcasts which contain clear, concise presentations of the gospel. Even our own church’s morning worship services are posted online every week, along with sermon texts and bulletins.

But in spite of all that, don’t we all know people who aren’t as active in the life of the Church as they could be? In fact, don’t we all know people, perhaps even some within our own families, who don’t claim to have a relationship with Christ at all? Like castaways on desert islands, they are surrounded by the living water of God’s Word, but yet are dying of thirst.

And the same thing was true in Ezekiel’s vision, wasn’t it? For in spite of all his preaching, in spite of everything he himself did, those dead people still hadn’t come back to life by the end of verse 8. No matter how much the Word of God flowed over and around them, no matter how much their outward condition may have changed, there was still no breath in them.

And where would that breath have to come from? If we were looking at this text in the original Hebrew, the answer would be obvious, for in that language, the word for “breath” is the same as the word for “wind” and “spirit.” In other words, for these people to live again, they would need the Spirit of God to come into them.

And isn’t that what Jesus told Nicodemus in what is perhaps the most famous passage in all of Scripture, John chapter 3? For someone to have eternal life, he must be born again, born from above, reborn by the infilling of the Spirit of God. And that’s what eventually happened to these dry bones – the breath, the wind, the Spirit of God came into them and they lived and stood on their feet – they were born again.

Now, it would be very easy for us to go too far in this direction. Just as it wouldn’t be right for us to think that all we need to do is to tell lost people the good news, to prophesy to dry bones, it would be just as wrong to think that since the Spirit of God is responsible for giving people new birth, then there’s nothing whatever we can do for the lost. That’s the sort of thing lots of people accuse us Calvinists of believing – that evangelism isn’t necessary because God is the One Who saves sinners.

But when we look at today’s passage, we see that can’t be right. After all, God told Ezekiel to get busy about preaching the gospel, to prophesy to the dry bones. In fact, God told Ezekiel to do this first, so there’s some sense in which the proclamation of the gospel is a prerequisite for someone being born again. And we know good and well that Jesus told all His followers to make disciples, bearing witness to Him and teaching His word. But at the same time, today’s passage is clear that all such efforts are insufficient to bring salvation to anyone.

So, if we’re not just supposed to sit back and let God do all the work, if we’re supposed to get busy and preach the gospel, but at the same time, if that preaching is insufficient without God giving new birth to the dry bones, then what’s the missing piece? Do we have some other part to play in the salvation of sinners?

Well, what did God tell Ezekiel? After he prophesied to the dry bones, God told him to do something else – to prophesy to the breath, to speak to the breath, the wind, the Spirit of God. God told Ezekiel to tell the Spirit of God, “Come from the four winds, O breath, O wind, O Spirit of God, and breathe on these slain that they may live.” And it was only after Ezekiel spoke to God, prayed to God for the lost, that God’s breath, that God’s Spirit filled those who were dead and made them live again. We therefore cannot escape the conclusion that it was not just Ezekiel’s proclamation of the gospel, but also Ezekiel’s prayer for the lost that was necessary to put the process of their salvation in motion. The amazing truth is that God chose to wait until Ezekiel prayed for the lost before He would make that great army of the dead stand on their feet.

So, of course we need to pray for the work of our Evangelists in New Braunfels, and Austin and New Orleans, that God would pour out His Spirit on the lost in those big cities. But there are a few lost folks around here who need Jesus just as much. So think again about those folks – maybe just one or two – folks you know who need to know Christ. Think about those folks you know – maybe just one or two – who have drifted away from the Church, those who need to know Christ better. Maybe God is calling you to invite those people to Church. Maybe God is calling you to share a verse of Scripture with them that you find particularly meaningful. Maybe God has given you a relationship with those people so that you might be able to tell them about what Jesus has done for you, about the hope you have in Christ.

But before you do any of those things, remember that God is the only One Who can bring new life to the dead – isn’t that what He said at the end of today’s passage? “I will open your graves and raise you from your graves.” “I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.”

And so before you speak to those whom God has put on your heart, speak to God about them. Ask God to breathe His breath, His wind, His Spirit into their hearts. Ask God to draw them to Himself, to soften their hearts to receive the good news that Jesus Christ died for sinners like all of us. And let us trust God to hear our prayers and pour out His showers of blessing on all of us.