

Preacher: Vicar Tim Redfield Date: March 9, 2008 Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14
Theme: Know that God gives us a Living Hope

What do you hope for? Do you hope for a delicious supper every day? Do you hope for spring to come quickly so that all the snow and ice finally go away? Do you hope for a job that you really enjoy and that is not stressful? There are many ways that the question could be answered. Each of us has different blessings that we hope for. Some of us may be happy with good grades in school. For others of us it may be that we would be satisfied with a good family life at home. When we don't get what we hope for it can sometimes be difficult. We may even stop hoping for other things in our lives. Today's scripture reading from Ezekiel is a picture of lost hope. This picture of the Valley of Dry Bones reminds us that when hope is lost it can make us feel completely dried up and defeated. Lost hope can only be restored through the power of our God. This prophesy helps us to Know that God gives us a Living Hope. First we see that this sinful life can dry up our hope. Then we learn that God's grace makes our hope alive.

Part 1: This sinful life can dry up our hope.

When the Lord gave this prophesy to Ezekiel, the Israelites were in captivity in Babylon. When Ezekiel started his work as a prophet, only some of the Israelites were in captivity. The reason for this was that when Babylon had first attacked Israel, they only took some of the people captive and they let the rest remain in their homeland. God was punishing the people of Israel with this captivity because of their unfaithfulness. God's chosen people had disrespected him, his word, and his prophets so often that now he was using the Babylonian captivity as a consequence for their sin.

Early on in his ministry, Ezekiel had warned the Israelites who were with him in Babylon about the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. When the Babylonians had taken this first group captive, they had not completely destroyed Israel. Because of this, many of the captives became complacent and didn't think that this captivity was really such a terrible thing. They went about their lives in Babylon with a false trust. They thought that Israel was still strong because the city of Jerusalem and the temple were still standing. Ezekiel prophesied to them about the destruction so that they would repent and turn their trust back to the Lord.

Our reading today takes place after Jerusalem had been destroyed. At this time, the rest of the Israelites had also been brought to Babylon as captives. Because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, many Israelites had lost hope. They said, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off" (37:11). The people of Israel had lost their confidence in the ability of Jerusalem and the temple to endure. Now the Israelites were in the pit of despair. They felt like the bones in the valley. They felt dried up and they felt like they had no hope of ever feeling alive again. As Ezekiel viewed the Valley of Dry Bones he felt what the people of Israel were feeling. The situation looked bleak. The people didn't have any confidence that they could ever be made whole again. Just like those bones, they knew that there was nothing they could do to help themselves. This attitude which was completely hopeless led them into despair.

This despair was another sin that the people were committing. They were not trusting in God to take care of their dire situation. They felt like they were cut off in two ways. They felt cut off from their homeland because of the destruction of their capital city and their place of worship. They also felt cut off from God. They felt like God had abandoned them. Here they were, captives in a foreign land, and it looked like they were never going to be set free again. They had no hope. They did not trust that God was going to provide for them.

How does this prophesy apply to each of us? There are times in our lives that we lose our hope. We also fall into the sin of despair just like the Israelites in captivity. Our situation is different but the sins are the same. As we live in this sinful world, there are many pressures and struggles that can cause us to lose hope. We may struggle with all the debts and financial troubles that keep piling up no matter how hard we try to conquer them. We deal with the pressures that come at home, school, or work. Our families want and need us to do so much for them and we just can't do it all. Our bosses give us so much work to do and there is just not enough time in the day to get it all done. Our teachers pile on so much homework that we have to stay up late and we have no time for anything else.

How do you react when troubles and difficulties come up in your life? Do you throw your hands up in frustration and say, "I just can't do it all!"? In these situations, we sometimes commit the sin of despair when we try to do it all ourselves. When we lose hope because of the things of this life, then we are not trusting in God to take care of things. When we get angry or frustrated with God because of these difficulties, that is the sin of despair. When we blame God for the troubles in our lives, we are sinning.

When we feel dried up like the valley of dry bones because of this life, we need to realize that the sin of despair is really our enemy. The picture that the prophet Ezekiel painted in these verses is a good reminder that God is the one who can restore our hope and lead us out of our despair. The sin of despair can destroy our hope. It is only God's grace that can take away our despair and make our hope a living hope.

Part 2: God's grace makes our hope alive.

God is the one who has the power to restore hope. In this prophesy, God is reminding the Israelites that he will not leave them in their captivity. He will restore them. He says, "O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you back to the land of Israel" (37:12). Just like God brought those dead bones back to life, God will bring the people of Israel back to life. God is the one who has power to restore hope. The bones in the valley could not make themselves alive again. The people of Israel could not get out of their captivity. Only God could bring life back to the bones and bring the people safely back to their home. In captivity, the people felt like they were no longer living because of their lost hope. God promised that he would give them a new life. He was going to bring them out of captivity and take them back to the land of Israel.

God reminds them that he will renew their pride in their country and he will renew their faith. He says, "I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken and I have done it, declares the LORD" (37:14). After God took the Israelites back to Israel then they would know and confess that God had done this great thing. They would have this faith because of the working of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. Because of faith, they can live a life which gives glory to God and has hope in his promises.

God reminds us in many ways that he has power to drive away any despair that may be in our hearts and restore our hope. In the Gospel lesson today, Jesus showed many people his great power over death. Mary and Martha were upset and even blamed Jesus for the fact that their brother had died. Jesus took this opportunity to show his power as God. He raised Lazarus from the dead. On that day, many people were strengthened in their faith. This miracle reminds us of what Jesus did for all of us.

When Jesus went to the cross of Calvary for us, it could have seemed like a time to lose hope. Someone who did not understand what Jesus was doing at that time surely could have wondered why Jesus let himself be arrested, mocked, tortured, and crucified. Jesus endured much more on that day than we could ever endure in this life. With his innocent death, Jesus took away all of our sins. With his sacrifice, Jesus renewed the hope of all sinners. Our sins put him on that cross, God's love for us kept him there so that we could be forgiven. When he rose triumphantly three days later, it showed that he had conquered the grave. Because he rose, so also we will rise one day. Our hope rests entirely upon Jesus.

Just like God raised the bones back to life in Ezekiel's prophesy, God has raised each of us from spiritual death to spiritual life. Before God gave us this life we were on the path to hell because of our sin. Now that God's grace has worked faith in us through the working of the Holy Spirit, we have a sure hope. We are sure of the forgiveness and eternal life that we have through Christ. God continues to strengthen us through his Means of Grace. Every time we receive the gospel through God's Word or through the sacraments we are built up in our faith.

When we feel stressed out because of the hardships in this life, God comes to us through his gracious gospel and renews our hope. He continues to provide for our needs. He guides us through the difficult times in our lives. He makes sure that our families are taken care of. When we look back on our lives we see that God has always been there for us. When our jobs seemed too stressful, when our homework seemed like it was so great, or when it seemed like we couldn't get everything done, God helped us to make it through those times. God continues to remind us that the hardship of this life will pass. He gives us the benefit of having his Word which is able to strengthen us and keep our hope alive. We are blessed with being able to hear about all that he has done for us. When we are focused on Christ, then all the troubles of this life don't seem so terrible. God's grace and the faith that he gives to us have the incredible power to keep us strong in our faith. We stay focused on our forgiveness and our sure hope of eternal life.

Conclusion

There are many things that we can hope for in this life: a good job, good weather, no debt, and a happy family life, to name a few examples. It can be easy to get upset when things don't go our way. We may even be tempted to blame God. Ezekiel reminded us that God is the only one who can renew our hope. The most important way that God has done this is by sending his Son to be our Redeemer. He continues to strengthen our faith in Christ and build us up so that we have the sure hope of eternal life and forgiveness that are freely given to us. When Christ is at the center of our lives, all the problems in our lives don't seem so bad. Through the prophesy of the valley of Dry Bones, God showed that he would restore the hope of the people of Israel. Through the gracious gospel, God shows us how he can restore our hope. May we always remember that Christ is the source of our hope. Give thanks that God has given us the sure confidence and hope in the forgiveness and eternal life won for us through the cross of Christ.