

Ezekiel 37:1-14July 17, 2011 – 5th SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**Hope Alive!**✠ **Bones** (vv.1-3)✠ **Breath** (vv.4-10)✠ **Battlefield** (vv.11-14)

In the name of Jesus, our living Hope, dear people of God:

Would it not be shocking if instead of squawking, a baby spoke at its own Baptism? Everyone would be all ears if the baby pulled itself to full height and said, “Here I am at my Baptism. It’s a good thing I decided to come! I told my mom and dad they should have a baby. I told them to get me Baptized today. Now you should let me into the Church. I gave myself life! I chose to be born again!”

As ridiculous as it sounds, every human heart wants to take credit for life. Either our society wants to deny God’s government right to capital punishment or to demand a woman’s right to end the life of her baby as long as it’s not yet born. Spiritually in the church we have the same problem with arrogant hypocrisy. Whether it’s Roman Catholic Semipelagianism, Reformed decision theology, Lutheran pietism, or my own sinful heart trying to find comfort in my hard work – we all want to be the baby that takes credit for our own life of body and soul. Left like this, we would never have **Hope Alive!**

✠ **Bones** (vv.1-3)

Of all places for God to take us to church, I would never choose this one! The prophet Ezekiel writes: *“The hand of the LORD was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.”* I can just hear all the little girls and boys saying, “OO! Gross!” But Ezekiel says, *“He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.”* Maybe you’d want to run away but the LORD asked, *“Son of man, can these bones live?” I said, “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”* Good answer! What else can you say? There’s much that I don’t understand. You alone know, O LORD.

When I was young my dad had to identify the body of a boy from our congregation who fell off a fishing boat and drowned at sea. Dad said it was hard to tell it was him after a few days in the ocean. The closest I ever got to a dead animal was the neighbor’s cat that got some kind of crazy disease and died over by the hedge while my brothers and I watched. Sometimes a body in a casket looks so natural you think it will wake up. But it never happens when mourners cry. Past the funeral when the flesh is gone, the **Bones** finally turn to dust and ashes. It’s what God said when He cursed Adam for his sin: *“Dust you are and to dust you will return.”* (Genesis 3:19 NIV84) Not just our bodies, but our souls are dead by nature. God says, *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”* (Ephesians 2:1 NIV84) We cannot sit up spiritually any more than a dead body could wake up and walk, or a baby decide its own Baptism.

✠ **Breath** (vv.4-10)

What if you were Ezekiel, and God said to preach to that whole valley of dry bones? This is not how we see the church, is it? *Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.’”* Would you do it? Or would you think, “What good will preaching do these dry bones?”

Ezekiel says, *“I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.”* Lots of people look like Christians. Some of our own members seem to think being in a church directory is all they need. But do they despise

preaching and God's Word by not giving God even one hour a week? You can be just as dead in unrepentant sin against the Third Commandment as a serial killer breaking the Fifth or teenagers and the elderly these days sleeping around against the Sixth Commandment. Jesus says, ***“Unless you repent, you too will all perish.”*** (Luke 13:5 NIV84) Preachers don't get to change that. As God warned Ezekiel in two other places (3:16-23; 33:1-20), preachers incur God's wrath for not warning against sin.

Thank God that He does not turn away from us like disgusting road kill. If I'm riding my bike and see a dead deer in the ditch or smell a dead skunk, I stop breathing until I'm past. God saw us dead in our transgressions and sins, but He stopped. Then He died and rose again. He took our sins away and gives us life. ***“Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’ ”***

It's one of the hardest things to do when you're depressed. Or when someone said something unkind. Or when you're so busy with work or school or just life. Squeezing time in for God's Word just does not seem to make sense to these breathless bodies of ours.

In the old days when pastors walked lonely country paths to member homes, a parson came upon the cottage of a dear friend who had not been in church for a long time. As usual the man was very welcoming and invited his pastor in to sit by the fire. He went on for a while about how hard it was to get the crops in that fall, how so many ewes had miscarried with their lambs, how the milk cow got mastitis – one thing after another. The pastor listened patiently until his friend finished. Then he got up and took a pair of tongs to reach a red hot coal from the fireplace. He set it out on the hearth and sat back down. In silence the two men watched as the coal grew cold and died. “I see what you mean, Pastor.” The man realized He needed the fire of God's Word to keep his faith alive. He never missed another Sunday.

Preaching seems foolish, but God commands it for pastor and for people. Ezekiel obeyed: ***“So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.”*** We're not gentleman farmers in cozy cottages. For God's people this life is a...

✠ Battlefield (vv.11-14)

A man came to my door while I was working on this sermon. “How are you today?” I asked. “I'm fine. A little warm, but I'm dealing with it.” He held up a clipboard as he introduced himself taking donations. All I saw was the word, “Pro-choice.” My eyes get really big. “You're ‘Pro-choice?’” I asked, not trying to hide my amazement. “Do you mean you want to give the baby a choice?” He dodged the question: “I'm just trying to keep abortion safe and legal.” Again I shook my head in amazement, “There are no safe abortions. The baby always dies!” “There's still rape and incest,” he countered with a smile as he turned away. “That's less than one percent,” I answered, still incredulous. “I trust the women,” he said triumphantly. “You trust them to kill their babies? If you think someone has to die, why don't you kill the rapist?” As some Christians grow tired, the **Battlefield** rages around and in us.

Thank God for the hard days that remind us you can't do battle without your weapons. And you can't have life without God's **Breath**. We're so blessed if we feel the need like God's people in exile.

“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. 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.’ ”

God has done it. When Jesus died, He said, ***“It is finished.”*** (John 19:30) When Jesus promised, He sent the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. He sends His Holy Spirit whenever God's Word is preached today. So come to life, dry **Bones**! Take up the weapons of the Spirit by the **Breath** of God. On the **Battlefield** boast in Jesus Christ alone. To God alone be glory! Stand up, stand up for Jesus. Amen.