

Can these bones live!

I'm reasonably confident that if I were to ask almost anyone here this morning to describe the unique work or role of God the Father and God the Son, without too much trouble you could respond that God the Father is the Creator and God the Son is the Redeemer. But what about the third person of the Trinity: The Holy Spirit.

What is the role associated with the Holy Spirit? How would you describe it? Maybe you still remember someone once telling you that "The Holy Spirit is the Sanctifier." But what does that mean?

Today, it means that the Holy Spirit is the answer to the question that believers have asked since the beginning of time: Can these bones live?

The immediate context of this question the Lord asked Ezekiel was the fall of Jerusalem to Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army right around 596 BC. For centuries the Israelites had ignored and even laughed at God's warnings of impending doom, but now that the Lord had proven good to his Word, their tune had changed drastically.

The Lord sums up the overwhelming mood in, "our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost. We have been completely cut off." It's hard to blame them for their despair. They had been conquered. They had been ripped out of their homes and exiled to a foreign nation. And now their temple, their point of contact with God's forgiveness and love – had been destroyed. They, as a nation, and more than that – as God's chosen people were as good as dead. "Could those bones live?"

This was neither the first nor the last time that God's people appeared to have very good reason to despair Think of Abraham and Sarah. He's 100 years old; she's 90 – and the Lord had tied all his promises to this elderly couple having a son. "Can these dead bodies really produce a son?"

Fast forward to Israel's return from exile. 70 years had passed since God had sent hundreds of thousands of them into captivity in Babylon to discipline them for their idolatry. Now roughly 50,000 of them have returned, by God's grace to Jerusalem. But it's nothing more than a deserted heap of blackened, broken stones. "Can this city be rebuilt?"

Fast forward another 400 years. All of God's promises to Israel are tied to a king who would come from the House of David. But what did David's house look like on that first Christmas? Isaiah called it a dead stump. They've been colonized by the Roman Empire. Their "king" Herod is little more than the puppet of Rome. For all intents and purposes, the House of David had been reduced to a poor carpenter from Nazareth named Joseph and an even poorer virgin named Mary. "Can this dead, dry stump of a family line, the line of the Saviour live?"

Not much has changed, has it? Don't we ask the very same question: "can these bones live?" Who of us hasn't stood at the grave of a loved one and wondered: "will I ever see them again?"

What about all those former believers who by all appearances have had their faith swallowed up by the temptations and empty promises of the world.: Will they be saved?

For decades now our Synod and its congregations have been heavily focused on outreach, on gaining new members, and yet, what has the result been? Church memberships have been declining, many churches have closed their doors, and our nation is more secular and pagan than ever before. "Can the church survive for much longer?"

Can we really hope to live and not to live and not suffer in eternity.

Deceased people, even deceased believers don't suddenly rise to life. Despite centuries of research and billions of dollars spent, science hasn't figured out how to reverse the aging process.

Young people who have fallen from faith aren't streaming back to church, repentant and looking for forgiveness. Marriage often seems easier to escape than to heal. Every poll says that Christianity is dying in our country.

"Can these bones live?" All the evidence, everything we've ever seen or experienced says "No. It's hopeless."

Thank God there is another answer. Ezekiel sets an important example for us when it comes to facing and responding to the truly difficult questions of life. When the Lord asks him, Son of man, can these dry bones live? Ezekiel doesn't look in the mirror, he doesn't look to his reason or his own ingenuity, he doesn't look to the brightest experts or the most advanced science. Where does he look? To his almighty Lord: and declares, "Lord God, you know."

Why is that important? Because God knows something we don't know. God knows something we can't know unless and until he reveals it to us. God knows the awesome power of the Holy Spirit.

But before we get there, there's one more thing we need to repent of, change our minds about: our tendency to judge God on our own terms, limiting him to the extent of our own knowledge and understanding.

The Holy Spirit didn't look at that valley of dry bones the same way Ezekiel did. He didn't throw his hands in the air and say: "Science, medicine and reason say that dry, dead bones can't live, so I guess that's that?"

In the same way, when God the Holy Spirit looks at our sinfulness, he doesn't look at what medicine, psychology, statistics or even everyday ordinary common sense says. He doesn't agree that dead people must stay dead; that hardened unbelievers can't be brought to faith; that sheep who have strayed can't be brought back into the fold; or that through the forgiveness he provides in Word and Sacrament can't overcome any and every sin or habit or addiction that afflicts us.

That's because the Holy Spirit doesn't see things like we do through the strict categories of possible and impossible. Jesus said that with God all things are possible. The Holy Spirit doesn't operate in the realm of the possible and probable but the impossible and improbable. The Holy Spirit clothed those dead, dry bones with tendons and ligaments and flesh – and then breathed the breath of life into them. Apparently, the Holy Spirit doesn't have much regard for what we think is possible or impossible.

The question is: how? How does the Holy Spirit choose to accomplish these seemingly impossible things? How did the Holy Spirit bring that valley of dry bones to life? Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, 'Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.'"

The Holy Spirit brought those dead, dry bones to life through a dull, dry sermon preached by Ezekiel. How did the Holy Spirit bring 3000 to faith on Pentecost? Not through the rushing wind or the tongues of flame, but through the sermons preached and the baptism administered by Peter and the other disciples. In fact, that's a common theme in Scripture, isn't it? The universe came into existence; Adam received life; Abraham and Sarah had a son; the Israelites returned to Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, and the Son of God was born of a virgin woman – through the Word of God; simply because God said so.

If you want to know where and how the Holy Spirit works, that's where you should look, to God's Word. "Because God said so" is the foundation for our faith and our lives. All who died in faith will physically rise to life, because God said so. The Church will endure persecution and pandemics, because God said so. Unbelievers can and will be brought to faith through water and the Word whenever and wherever God says so.

The sins you and I have committed in our lives have been forgiven and removed forever, because God told Jesus to pay for them and he did.

"Can these bones live?"

No. Not if you're looking at them through the lens of human reason.

But think of it this way: if fickle, feeble humans like us can develop a vaccine for a novel virus, can build cars that don't need gas, can send rockets to Mars – who are we to question what God the Holy Spirit can do through water, bread and wine connected to his Word? Yes, even through this dry, boring sermon the Holy Spirit is creating and strengthening faith in those dead, dry bones of yours. Because God says so. Amen.