

Thus saith the Lord!!

Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14

John 11: 17 – 45

Purpose: To affirm the people of God who are open to the creative word of the Sovereign God.

I want you to be completely and utterly certain that the view I see when I look out from this lectern does not remind me in any way, shape or form of the valley of dry bones that we heard about in the reading from the prophet Ezekiel this morning. I'm sure that among the congregation there are a few creaking bones. And I guess that among us we may even have a few artificial joints. But, no when I think about you and about others in our worshipping communities at Oxley Darra, Ezekiel's valley of dry bones is not what springs immediately to my mind.

I know that from time to time on the journey of life each one of us may feel as though the valley of dry bones is perfect description for the place we have been. In an ordinary Christian life, there are times when life is good and pleasant. Maybe even very, very, good and very, very pleasant! Then there are times when life seems hard. Indeed, sometimes very, very

hard! And in those times, I guess a valley of dry bones is a pretty good description of how our life has been.

But, I want to be completely and utterly clear.

Whatever the ups and downs of your Christian journey when I think about you – and when I think about our worshiping communities at Oxley-Darra – my starting point has never been an image of the valley of dry bones.

Which means I think that I've missed my chance to preach an easy sermon this morning! The easy sermon would have been to paint a picture of our life together as an abject failure. It's never hard to find failure and nit-pick or to discover mistakes which are open to mock and ridicule. I know because failure and mistakes are part of my life too. And I make them all too easily. They are an ever present reality of human existence. Our sins are real. The easy sermon would have found fault in all of us and promised that new life would come if we would only listen and obey the proclaimed word of God.

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The trouble is that this story from Ezekiel is anything but a story about failure. This is a story about success. And not just a story about any success! This is a story about absolute success. In this story we are witness to not just a miniscule change, but a total transformation.

On an archaeological dig site on an old Indian camp site in North America. Some students had just made a breathtaking discovery. Buried beneath the soil they found an ancient carved wooden bowl which believe it or not after at least three hundred years still carried the aroma of seal oil that had been carried within it. But, that wasn't the most amazing part of the story.

One of them told the story later: "As we were washing away the soil, trying to clear the mud from the bowl suddenly there was a leaf. A green leaf from an alder tree and fresh and green as the leaves on the alder trees that stood near the site. As we looked at awe and wonder at this leaf so fresh and green suspended so long in the wet airless mud, it turned brown before our very eyes." In an instant, the leaf took its natural place in the endless cycle of death and life. In an instant came the total transformation!

And in this story from the prophet Ezekiel this morning the opposite happens. The endless cycle of nature is reversed. The total transformation happens in the reverse direction. In this valley of death, in this graveyard where the hopes and dreams of flesh and blood are long forgotten, new life comes. This is a story of absolute, unbelievable miraculous success. It is not at all a story of failure.

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But, I think that it is a story about from where success comes. In this story there are three ingredients to success. The first is the purposefulness of the Sovereign God. The second is the creative word spoken by the prophet. The third is the human action by which the creative word is spoken and consequently through which God's purpose is achieved.

1. The foundation of the successful transformation that takes place in the story of the valley of dry bones is that God wills it. "The hand of the Lord came upon me," the prophet recalls, "and he brought me out." The events that are about to unfold are the Lord's doing.

This is not the prophet's doing. This is the work of the Lord.

Success for many is measured by many things. It can be a grade on an academic transcript or a surplus or a profit in a financial statement. Some will measure it by the numbers of cars they own, the numbers of rooms in their home, or their standing on the social ladder; their salary, the number of grandchildren or the frequency and desirability of their overseas trips.

But for us, the success that counts is that which is shaped by the will and purpose of the sovereign God. The creative word is spoken, the creative word is fulfilled because God wills it.

2. The proclamation of the creative word is the second element of the successful transformation that takes place in the story of the valley of dry bones. Three times the Lord gives the command: Prophecy! Prophecy to the bones! Prophecy to the wind! Prophecy to the whole house of Israel. "I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live."

God's will and purpose is not secret. The divine will is exposed to those to those to whom it is intended. And

when the divine will is expressed it not just a lot of hot air that rises idly heavenwards, it achieves its purpose. *Like an arrow speeding towards its target, God's word meets its mark. That's why I speak of it as God's creative word. It does something!*

In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light and there was light." Over and over again in the creation stories, God speaks and what God speaks comes to pass. It is this creative word which the prophet speaks: That same word which brings light and life in the creation stories in Genesis, brings light and life in the prophetic imagination of Ezekiel, and light and life and hope to a people in exile. "I will put my Spirit within you and you shall live." The second ingredient of success in this miraculous transformation that takes place in the valley of dry bones, and which will take place in the experience of the nation Israel in exile, is the creative word which God commands the prophet to speak.

3. Notice then the third ingredient of success: the prophet speaks. It may be God who speaks the creative word, but that word is uttered from the lips of a mere mortal.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” God asks. “Prophecy! Mortal, these bones are the House of Israel. Prophecy!” The humanity of the prophet is one of the enduring themes in Ezekiel. The prophet does not come heroically to the rescue. He is not a conquering hero or a mighty ruler, he is a mere mortal, thoroughly human, just like you and me.

And ultimately, we cannot remove this mere mortal from the success story of the valley of dry bones. This mere mortal listens for the creative voice of God. This mere mortal discerns the purpose of God. *This mere mortal says what needs to be said and does what needs to be done. Without this mere mortal there is no success!*

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And that’s what I see when I look out from this pulpit. I see mere mortals who like me make mistakes. I could nit-pick and discover our failures, but fundamentally that’s not who we are in Christ. Fundamentally, God’s Spirit is within us and we have life. We are captivated by God’s sovereign purpose. God’s creative word continues to meet its mark in our lives. And mere mortals that we are, we respond as we are able.

That's the stuff of which success is made irrespective of the circumstances of our lives: Mere mortals open within the community of faith to the creative direction of the Sovereign God!