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Lent 5 • Ezekiel 37:1–14 • April 6, 2014

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On this Sunday before Passion Week, both Ezekiel 37 and John 11 (the gospel reading) anticipate Easter; even if not there yet we know where we are headed.

Within the context of Ezekiel, the end has already come with the fall of Jerusalem reported in 33:21. The prophet's own speech is raised from the dead, as it were (Ez 33:22), but there is still the need to understand just what—and why—this has happened. A “new Israel,” united and full-bodied, must come forth and arise. The shepherd-leaders will be replaced with God himself (Ez 34:11), who will sort out the humble from the greedy sheep (Ez 34:17–24). God will deal with their shame and put a new spirit within them (Ez 36:24–26).

We cannot here rehearse all the wonderful details of this text, but readers are referred to the CPH commentary by Horace Hummel. We briefly note the following:

Many other commentaries like to note that the text is about the restoration of hope to a hopeless people (v. 11), and so they downplay any portrayal of a literal resurrection. But even as a metaphor, the vision is of dead—and decomposed—bodies that are indeed restored in a true resurrection *of the body*, parts put back together (cf. Job

10:11 for the same four “flesh and bones” elements). The assumption is that God can do this.

Key word repetitions abound: the “hand of YHWH” (*yad-yhwh*) upon the prophet to give him special revelation; the various uses of “spirit” (*ru’ach*, ten times) “bones” (also ten times), the verb “to prophesy” and “to live/come back to life,” and the use of *binneh* at key moments: v. 3 (two times), vv. 5, 7, 8, 13).

The image is of a great defeat in a battlefield valley, where the bodies of the “slain” (v. 9) have not been buried but allowed to decay. Thus the command to “prophesy to these bones” (v. 4) seems ludicrous: there were no ears to “hear the word of Yahweh.” But this is the word of the Creator, and the scene is reminiscent of Genesis 2: flesh and bones from the face of the earth, awaiting the breath of life.

Then comes the key role of the “spirit, wind, breath” (*ru’ach*). This is not ordinary wind but comes, as it were, from the four compass points all at once (v. 9), and there is life.

Verse 10 cleverly combines the “very many” and the “very dry” now as a “very, very (*me’od me’od*) great army” standing on its feet: the slain ones resurrected to rejoice the *tseba’oth*, yes, right here on earth.

A sound and an earthquake (v. 7) surround the scene. One anticipates both Good Friday and the resurrection, when creation itself participates in giving up the dead.

Finally, the goal is that “you will know that I am YHWH,” which is code for all God is and does as the one true God: Creator and Redeemer, who raises up a mighty people as his own by the power of the Spirit. The God “who knows” (v. 3) is to be known (vv. 6, 13, 14). He will be known when he opens graves, puts his life-giving spirit into his resurrected people, and places them in the land as one people (v. 18) under one king (v. 24), so that the nations will know that Yahweh is the one who makes holy (v. 28).

Homiletical Thoughts

The resurrection is coming: that is the goal, and it brings hope to a hopeless people, not just death but resurrection. But first death: one cannot be raised from the dead until one is dead. So Yahweh has come as Shepherd-King, in a parody of a royal procession on Palm Sunday and then as the Lamb that was slain for us, on the great battlefield. But this is not a story of life and death; it is a story of death—and life.

And then a mighty army becomes the church militant upon the land—now the whole earth—united with the church triumphant, wherever the risen and reigning Shepherd-King is proclaimed and known.