

BY THE POWER OF GOD

Writing *The Messiah* was a lifesaver for George Frederick Handel; it was a creative period that brought him back to life. The comeback experience started on the night of August 24, 1741, a bitter night for Handel. Barely recovered from a paralytic stroke, he limped despondently through the dark, deserted London streets. Scarcely 56 years old, it seemed that his career was finished. For years his Italian operas had been popularly accepted in London. But the public suddenly transferred its interest to French stage plays, and Handel was sinking into financial insecurity. What's more, his health had broken and he was barely existing. He wasn't really living.

But that night in 1741, a man named Charles Jennens gave Handel a manuscript he thought Handel might develop into an oratorio. Half-heartedly, Handel leafed through the manuscript when he returned home and came upon a passage that caught his eye: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed." Suddenly the words began to come alive and take on meaning. Handel forgot the depression, hopelessness, and deadness of spirit he had felt for so long. Harmonies of mighty choruses and the music of orchestra and organ flooded the barren soul of the man, and he was alive with creativity. Reaching for his pen, he began to stab the notes onto paper. With incredible rapidity he filled page after page. He worked through the night, without sleep. Night and day the music poured forth from the composer's soul and pen.

For days Handel worked in such feverish excitement that he admitted afterward, "Whether I was in my body or out of my body as I wrote it, I know not." Then on September 14, he wrote the final note and autographed the work. Stumbling to his bed, he slept for 17 hours. *The Messiah* became the world's best-loved religious oratorio and Handel's most profitable composition. His life was forever changed by it. He lived until 1759, and dating from his manuscript, he lived out his days in the full experience of being alive, a rebirth that came during the frenzy of composing the musical masterpiece for which he will be forever known and appreciated. (Glendon E. Harris)

How do we account for the before-and-after difference that took place in Handel? What transformed him from being a dispirited, weak, and near-the-end-of-his-rope shell of a man to one that was energized and empowered to work non-stop for several weeks with the end result being one of the most moving, beautiful, and much-loved pieces of music the world has ever known? Somehow Handel was gripped by the very power of God. The Spirit of God stirred and moved within Handel and enabled him to create music that has stood the test of time. That true story is a good lead-in for the scripture lesson concerning Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones. In 597 B.C.E., the Babylonians had taken Ezekiel, along with other prominent Jews, into exile. Soon after, the Lord called Ezekiel to prophesy and so he spoke out and condemned Judah and her leaders for their sins. When Jerusalem had fallen in 587 B.C.E., it was the turning point as Ezekiel saw his purpose shift from rebuking his people to reassuring them

that God would return them to their homeland and restore them to a vibrant relationship with God once more.

It was within this historical context that God's Spirit took hold of Ezekiel and, in a vision, showed him a valley full of bones. The Spirit led Ezekiel all around the valley. There were bones everywhere – ribs strewn about helter-skelter, piles of hipbones and femurs, clavicles and skulls littered and marred the landscape. The bones were bleached white for they had been there a long time; and, the bones were dry - they had the life sucked right out of them. The entire scenario was one of futility and hopelessness.

Then, the Lord asked Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" And, the normal response should have been, "Yahweh, you have got to be kidding! These bones don't stand a chance at coming back to life." However, Ezekiel knew better. While he knew that, humanly speaking, these bones would eventually turn to dust and blow away, he also knew that God was up to something. So, he wisely said, "O Lord God, you know," which is a safe way of saying, "I don't have a clue, Lord, but I bet you do."

Then Yahweh commanded Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and he told those lifeless skeletons that God was about to act. And sure enough, Ezekiel prophesied, and there was a noise, a sound of rustling and rattling as bones moved and came together. Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, followed by skin stretched over them. But there was no breath in them until the Lord told Ezekiel to prophesy again, which he did, and the very wind or breath or spirit of God entered into those lifeless forms and they came alive - by the power of God – and they stood together as a vast multitude.

In the last four verses, we can eavesdrop as Yahweh explained the vision to God's servant, Ezekiel. These bones were the people of Israel, who, because of the exile, felt dead and hopeless. They had lost their homes, loved ones, their nation and spiritual center to another country. They had been defeated and now were deflated, void of life and hope, cut off completely. Through this powerful vision, God made it clear that God was about to act on behalf of the exiles. God was going to open their graves, breathe into them the Spirit of life, and bring them back to their own soil. It's important to hear, once again, the promise and the power behind the closing verse: "Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord."

What God says, God does. History bears out this fact. God spoke through Ezekiel, Isaiah, and other prophets. Also, God kept the divine promise. In 539 B. C.E., God raised up Cyrus of Persia, who was victorious over the Babylonians and, in turn, Cyrus freed the Jews and allowed them to go home, back to the land of Israel once more.

Here's where the good news enters into the picture for us. Through this vision of the valley of dry bones, God wants a word with us. The Lord longs to speak these words of promise and fulfillment to us. And, in doing so, God breathes the Spirit into our lifeless, dried-out, hopeless lives so that we can truly come live. On our own, we probably can't change but God makes things happen! God's word does what it says. God speaks and it comes to pass. God acts, and nothing (not even death!) can prevent God's will from being done here on earth (and

within our lives) as it is in heaven.

By the power of God, our old bones can live again. We need to realize that whenever a situation seems hopeless to us, it is not hopeless for God. Maybe we feel tired, worn out, and used up. Perhaps a friendship or some other relationship seems hopeless. The valley of dry bones may be encountered after the loss of a job, or a marriage, the death of a loved one or some other transition in life that involves separation. It could be that we finally recognize that some youthful dream or heartfelt desire will never come to pass. The dry bones may be a faith that seems dry, brittle, and hopeless.

Whatever exile experience we are dealing with that prevents us from seeing a future filled with hope, just remember that God has spoken the word and it will not return to God empty but will accomplish the divine purpose in and for our lives. God's Spirit is readily available to us and the Spirit is moving, breathing within us, inflating us with life.

On our own, it is easy for us to feel dejected and say, "We can't do that." And, we're probably right – WE can't do much. But remember and be guided by our text for today: "Mortal, can these bones live?" "O Lord God, you know!" When we trust God and allow God to shape our lives, then nothing is impossible. There is no situation that is totally bereft of hope – why? – because God is everywhere, God cares, God loves, and God acts on our behalf to resurrect us, transform us, and bring us back to life.

And, I think what is true for us as individuals is equally true for us as a community of faith called the First Presbyterian Church of Martinsville, VA. It's easy to recall the good, old days and then focus on all the things that are lacking. We are not growing, we don't have as many young families as before, we have financial concerns, and so on. But when we look with hope and trust, and say, "O Lord God, you know," God will send forth the Spirit and breathe new life into us.

God not only acts to revive us, God will use us to help in the transformation of others. Notice in the text how God could have done it all. Instead, God told Ezekiel to prophesy and those old bones began to rattle and dance and come back to life. So, also, in restoring us back to life, God gives us work to do to bring forth life in others.

Will Willimon once described a dead institutional church. "...Hallways where children once hurried to their classes, now dark, dusty, vacant. Its empty pews staring back at the pulpit on Easter. Grass growing in the corners of the church parking lot. The frantic search for some agency to rent unused space for a church now preoccupied with keeping a roof over its head."

Then Willimon described how the bishop sent a seminary graduate to her first assignment, an inner city church in decline for the last 20 years. "Just keep it going as best you can," he suggested. She told the board that she thought she had a gift for working with children. "Then the bishop sent you to the wrong church," responded one of the women on the board, bluntly. "We are long past those years here."

Then the creative wind (of God) started to blow. The pastor found an old lady in the parish, Gladys, who used to play with Count Basie and the Dorsey Brothers. The pastor found two ladies to make peanut butter sandwiches. Then, on Wednesday the four of them rolled the

old piano out of the double doors of the Fellowship Hall. Gladys sat down and began to play hits from the 30's, then some ragtime. By 3:30 a crowd of children had gathered. The pastor passed out the sandwiches. Gladys moved from "In the Mood" to "Jesus Loves Me." The pastor told them a story about a man named Jesus. The children clamored for more.

A year passed. Today nearly a hundred children crowd into that church every Wednesday afternoon. On Sunday, classes are full, taught by a group of older women who thought they were too old to have anything to do with children. Those children brought their parents. And that church came to life once again – by the power of God.

During this Lenten journey, it's important for us to keep in mind that we will encounter some more dead bones as we recall Jesus' death on the cross and his burial in the tomb. We focus on his sacrificial death and, from all appearances, the end of hope. But with the dawn of Easter, we will remember and rejoice that, by the power of God, that inert, lifeless body was raised up in victory over the grave. And by his life, we can really live by laying claim to a new, abundant, and eternal life!

"O Lord God, you know." And now, we know, we hope, we believe that our individual and our collective bones can live (really live!) once more. O Lord God, breathe your Spirit into us, open our graves, help us to stand strong, and then use us, put us to work, so that others may also come alive and, along with us, testify to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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