

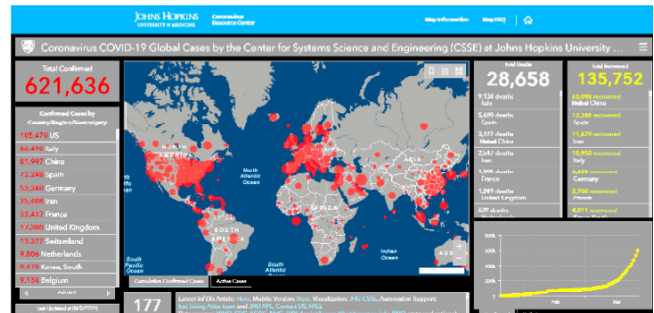
St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin March 29, 2020

Undefeated by Hopelessness

1. Hopelessness reigns when the Glory of the LORD departs
2. Hopefulness reigns when the Spirit of the LORD breathes life into us

Ezekiel 37:1-14

I don't know about you, but I have a hard time not checking on the John Hopkins COVID-19 page every day. For the last week or so, I've kept my eye on Russia. What are they doing that it hasn't spread anywhere else in the country? But recently, news is coming out, and the government is admitting it is growing there as well.



That makes me think of the city of Jerusalem at the time of Ezekiel. It was still a beautiful city. It seemed that nothing was wrong there. They were suffering from no infection of sin!



It was true, there were those people in exile in Babylon. For example, Ezekiel was one of the young leaders already in exile. But in Jerusalem, life pretty much went on as normal. Yes, the exile had affected some, but not most people... yet!

God called the prophet Jeremiah to speak to the people still in Jerusalem. He called the prophet Ezekiel to speak to the people in exile. Both foretold the coming destruction of Jerusalem. But no one believed it, their ministry was pretty much ignored.

The Lord told Ezekiel as his ministry began: "The house of Israel is not willing to listen to you because they are not willing to listen to me, for the whole house of Israel is hardened and obstinate" (Ezekiel 3:3).

It is hard not to see similarities with today, isn't it? The impact of the Christian church has been fading quickly over the last generation. People are unwilling to listen. They have all that they need. They don't need God. The whole nation is hardened and obstinate.

But is the problem truly "out there" in the world? I would encourage you to read Ezekiel 8-11, a vision of what the LORD saw among the Israelites.

Archeology has revealed that there was a spiritual contagion destroying the spiritual life of God's people. All over Judah, these "Judean Pillar Figurines" are found in people's homes. These are the household gods that many of the Israelites worshipped.

These household gods were not just found in an isolated pocket of Jerusalem. The prevalence of these gods showed that this spiritual contagion had spread through the entire populace.



But in Ezekiel's vision, the LORD reveals this contagion in the temple itself! Ezekiel digs through the wall of the temple and he sees the spiritual leaders of God's people worshipping idols!

He said to me, "Son of man, have you seen what the elders of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, 'The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land'" (Ezekiel 8:12).

How vile can it be! They are using the LORD in all caps, God's personal Savior name. And they were saying, "The Savior God cannot save us."

Could it be that the current pandemic and our nation's response is a call from our God that we as Christians search our own hearts?

Have we have thought, "The Lord does not see!"?

- Is that what is behind the pandemic of sexual promiscuity and sexual addiction that is infecting Christians at the same rate as non-Christians?
- Is that what is behind the pandemic of decreasing church attendance among Christians? There are more important things to do – to enjoy our cabin up north, to take our kids to sports events, to enjoy family time. Will these activities save our families?
- Is that what is behind the pandemic of judgmentalism that others see in the church?

What happened to God's church in Ezekiel's time? In his vision he saw the Glory of the LORD departing from the temple. The Glory of the LORD was this fantastic visual representation of our Savior God that Ezekiel describes in Ezekiel 1. He sees that Glory of the LORD in the temple. He sees it move out to the front of the temple, and ultimately leave the city.

When the Glory of the LORD departs, then hopelessness reigns. The judgment of God is only a matter of time. For the next six more years Ezekiel prophecies, and no one listens. Finally, the judgment comes; the city is destroyed.

“In the twelfth year of our exile, in the tenth month on the fifth day, a man who had escaped Jerusalem came to me and said, ‘The city has fallen’” (Ezekiel 33:21).

Could it be that now is the time that our God is saying to us, “The city has fallen.” I am not sure what the future holds for God’s church, but I do think it will look very different at least for the next months and probably years. How can it be that we aren’t worshipping together next week on Palm Sunday or anytime during Holy Week? Could this be an example where the Lord of the church is calling us to search our hearts? What idols have I set up there? What have I trusted in more than the Savior God?

I’ll be honest, I look to the future, my personal future, my financial future, the future of my family, the future of my church family, and hopelessness can easily set in. How many are going to get sick? How many are going to lose their jobs? How much depression and despair can we endure?

Could it be that the Lord has allowed his Glory to leave his church for a time so that we are a people drained of hope?

In our Old Testament lesson for today, Ezekiel speaks to people drained of hope and sees a miraculous change as the Spirit of the LORD breathes on the valley of dry bones.

Listen to this account.

The hand of the LORD was on 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. ² 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. ³ He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know.”

⁴ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’ ⁵ This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. ⁶ 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.’”

⁷ So 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. ⁸ I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

⁹ Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” ¹⁰ So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.

¹¹ Then he said to me: “Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ ¹² Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: 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. ¹³ Then you, my people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. ¹⁴ 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.’’

What is the valley of dry bones? “Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone.” Hopelessness reigns when the Glory of the LORD departs.

Can these dry bones live? Can our hope for the future be rekindled? Can hopefulness reign in our hearts?

Ezekiel says, “Sovereign LORD, you alone know!”

The LORD knows the future and he calls upon us to prophecy to these dry bones, to speak into those parts of our lives where hopelessness reigns.

Can the Sovereign LORD open up the graves and bring hope to a people without hope?

The open graves of the past give us hope.

In the Old Testament, the prophets pointed people back over and over again to the Savior who brought his people up out of Egypt. The most powerful nation in the world was not able to stop the LORD’s plan to save. Ten plagues, the Red Sea swallowing up the Egyptian army, manna and water in the wilderness. Look to the past and be filled with hope! Ours is a God who saves!

Look at the return of the exiles. Not only did God raise up a nation, he gave them a new heart. Those Judean Pillar Figurines? They are not found in the archeological record after the return from exile. The Sovereign LORD not only rescued them from the Babylonians, but also from the spiritual pandemic that had been destroying their hearts.

We can look to the account of Lazarus (John 11). His sisters knew that if Jesus had been present, their brother would not have died. When Jesus was present, death could not hold Lazarus. “Lazarus, come out!” And a hopeless situation became a joyous celebration. John records that many more came to faith in Jesus because of Lazarus’ resurrection.

In two weeks, we will join with Christians all over the world and celebrate the greatest assurance that our God can breathe life into our dry, hopeless, discouraged bones. The Savior who died for us rose victorious from the grave.

Dear brother, dear sister in Christ, what drains you of hope? Is it the fear of sickness and death? Is it the fear that you won’t be able to pay your bills or put food on your table? Is it the fear that life will never be like it used to be?

Those fears do dry our bones, don’t they! But take courage, dear friend, the Sovereign LORD who has shown himself to be the Savior God in the past is with us.

Let his Spirit breathe life into your dry bones. Listen to God’s Word regularly. Read it and make it your own. Claim this truth that in Christ, God is your Father. May the Apostle Paul’s faith be our own:

¹⁵ *The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, “Abba, Father.”* ¹⁶ *The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.* ¹⁷ *Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.* ¹⁸ *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Romans 8:15-18).*

Prophecy to the breath! Come Breath of God and breathe into our hearts the hope of life, now and forever. Amen.

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My Next Steps to an Undefeated Life

- **See the world from the LORD’s perspective:** Read Ezekiel 8-11, a vision in which the LORD reveals the sins that he sees and the removal of his saving presence. A powerful call to repentance to each of us.
- **Let the Spirit of the LORD breathe life into you:** Make a commitment to begin reading the Bible daily. Join Our Journey to the Empty Tomb. Here is the link to the reading guide.
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Abbreviated GroupWork

1. Read Romans 8:11-19. Share the words or phrases from this reading that are especially comforting to you.
2. Read Ezekiel 36:16-37:1-14.
 - a. Why did the LORD bring the people back from exile? (see 36:22-23) How can this comfort you and when you the guilt of failure makes it seem like not even God can love you?
 - b. What do you think that the LORD means by “a new heart and a new spirit”? How do you see that miracle fulfilled in you?
 - c. Share a time from your past when the Holy Spirit has breathed into your life and brought hope to a hopeless situation.

Prayer of the Church

LORD God, breathe your Spirit into our hearts and lives that we might live with hope.

We place into your care all who are sick or hospitalized, those listed in our worship folder, and those known to us personally, those who are already diagnosed with COVID-19, and those who will be in the days ahead. We ask that you would spare their lives and grant them healing. Be with their families as they seek to comfort and care for them.

Comfort those who have lost loved ones. We pray especially for the families of Nancy Beyer and Eileen Schnell whom you called home to yourself in heaven. Give them faith to celebrate that Eileen and Nancy are now at home with you, Lord.

Provide for our daily needs and open our eyes to the needs of others. Use us, our abilities and our generosity, as part of the way you answer the prayers of those around us.

Give wisdom to our elected leaders, give peace of body and mind to our police officers, firefighters and paramedics who are called to help those who are sick. Protect our men and women in the armed services, and especially a son of our congregation and graduate of our grade school who is being deployed overseas this week. Provide our health care providers with the tools and the skills necessary to serve the sick in our nation and in our world.

Hear us as we bring to you our private petitions.

Time for silent prayer.

Finally, gracious LORD, thank you for being present among us. Give us confidence that nothing can separate us from your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.