

Changed or Transformed?

Ezekiel 37:1-10; Psalm 146:8-10; Romans 12:1-3

Reverend Dr. Louise Barger

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When we look at any of the writings of the prophets, we are reminded about how difficult the people of God found it to be faithful in their relationship which they had established with God through the Covenant of the Law. Their greatest difficulty seems to have been with the commandments that were given to maintain that relationship with Yahweh, namely, the ones that God declared to them, saying,

- I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. (There shall be no other god that you worship except Me.)
- You shall not make for yourself an idol or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth.
- You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. (You are not to do anything that dishonors Me.)
- Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy.

Because they were unable live out the relationship that they had established with God, they found themselves also unable to have the right kind of relationships with one another that were described in the remainder of the commandments. They had the Law of God, the Commandments, given to them on Mount Sinai. They had stood at the base of the mountain and promised that whatever Yahweh said they would do. But that commitment didn't continue over the years. At one time they had been a people who lived in a form of government known as a theocracy where the prophets of God led the people, but they had wanted to be like all of the other nations and have a king. Kings came and went. Some kings were faithful to Yahweh, and some kings were unfaithful to Yahweh. And the nation followed their kings.

The prophet Ezekiel was born in 622 BCE. He was from a family of priests and was himself a priest. He describes his calling to be a prophet as coming at the age of 30. It was a time of concentrated effort by God to call back God's people. There were many prophets during that time who also spoke to the people.

Ezekiel was a contemporary of

- Jeremiah,
- Hulda, the first woman prophet,
- Daniel,
- Habakkuk,
- Obadiah.

Today's vision was held out before Ezekiel to demonstrate what was possible if the people were not only changed in their thinking and their actions but allowed themselves to be transformed by the Spirit of God living within them. The valley of dry bones is a visual message that describes the spiritual condition of the Israelites' situation to which Ezekiel and the other prophets were to speak. The song that Peter sang this morning has made this vision popular but there is more to it than a "catchy" tune and words.

In Ezekiel's vision the Lord takes him to a valley which has been the scene of a great battle. So great was the catastrophe that the slain were not even buried. Now the valley is covered with their dried out, bleached bones.

- Once these bones had been the people of a great army arrayed in all of their battle gear and engaged in the fight.
- Once they had been the proud defenders of the nation of Israel.
- Once they had been the defenders of the faith against the gods of those who would invade them.
- Now, their dry bones lie scattered across the valley.
- Now, they are no longer engaged in the fight.

As Ezekiel walks among them, God asks the question that will come down to us through the ages, "Can these bones live?" And Ezekiel responds,

- I don't know if life can happen here again.
- I don't see any sign of vitality here.
- Oh, God, only You are wise enough to know if there is hidden within these bones something that can be restored to life.
- Is there something that can make these bones rise up again and restore them to be a vital, living strong, faithful people?

We know the rest of the story. Ezekiel prophesied to the bones as God commanded, and behold, the bones began rising up and they began to come together. These bones are not just being changed, they are experiencing a transformation. A process is happening.

- God joins bones together with sinews;
- God causes flesh to cover the bones;
- God covers the flesh with skin
- they stand on their feet;
- they once more look like an army;
- they look fully human;

But they only come to life when the breath of God, the Spirit of God is breathed into them.

It is only when they are filled with the Spirit of God that they become alive and vital and become who they have always been intended to be. It was only when they were not just physically changed, but when they were transformed by the presence of the Spirit of God within them, that life was restored and they became fully alive.

It is this vision that portrays the message that Ezekiel must deliver to the people. Ezekiel's message to the people of Judah was about who they had become because of their wandering away from following God, and God's promise of the restoration of Judah if they were ready to be faithful. Ezekiel comes to speak a word of hope to a people

- who are in despair,
- who feel as though their souls are dried up, and
- their faith is all out of joint.

There is hope for this people as individuals and as a nation if they will allow the Spirit of God to fill their souls and they will follow God as they had promised. They were to follow God with their whole being.

What about us? What message is there for us today? The word of God is a living word that is intended to convey a teaching for all generations. So what message is there for us?

Perhaps when we think about Paul's writing to the Christians at Rome we can find that application for us. Paul wrote to the Christians who were living in Rome, but also those who were living throughout the Roman Empire, that they were to be a living sacrifice to God. He reminded them that it was their "reasonable service."

So, let's unpack that a little.

Remember that these Christians to whom Paul was writing were mostly Jews who had decided to follow Jesus as the promised Messiah. They were people who were accustomed to the Temple worship and the offering of sacrifices. Remember that they had been commanded, if at all possible, to come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices three times a year.

Now, Paul is saying to them that they are living in a new age, the age of the coming of the Messiah. They are no longer to make animal sacrifices at the Temple. Jesus has become their forever sacrifice for sin. Now, as people who have declared that they are followers of Jesus, they are to live their lives as such. The sacrifice that they make will be to live their lives as a living sacrifice, as righteous, worshiping people of the one true God. They are to live their lives, intentionally avoiding those things that would cause sin to enter their lives.

At one point Paul writes to the people and asks the rhetorical question, "Should we sin more so that we have more grace?" He answers his own question by saying, "Of course not!"

Paul sees these new Christians as constantly needing to reject the pressures of the society in which they live. One translation reads, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold." (J.B. Phillips)

Don't be a cultural Christian. I once was invited to be a part of a team that went to a church to lead them through a process that would look at renewal. It was a week-long process. During that week, someone quietly pulled me aside and told me that the teacher of the adult Bible class was the leader of the Klan in the area. On Sunday morning he put on his Christian persona a taught Sunday School. During the week he put on his white robes and his hood and led others in hateful practice. My report to the church was that renewal was not possible unless they chose leaders whose lives were authentically lived as Christians both inside and outside of the church.

If a person has declared that they are a follower of Jesus and they have been transformed by the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit within their lives, all that they do and say should reflect the image of Christ within their lives. Paul says, "That's your *reasonable* lifestyle, your *reasonable service*." No longer is it about just going to the Temple to sacrifice and worship; no more is it just about coming together on the Lord's Day to worship. He does say not to forsake gathering together to worship. That's important. But our total lifestyle, just as God expected of the people of Ezekiel's day, is to be lived out as a living sacrifice, a constant worship, to God.

The Psalmist wrote words that describe this kind of worship that was acceptable even before the coming of the Messiah. He wrote:

*O Lord, I call upon You; give ear to my voice.
May my prayer be counted as incense that rises to You.*

*May the lifting up of my hands in prayer be as an evening offering.
Protect my heart to any evil thing.*
(Excerpts from Psalm 141)

May all that we say or do in our lives bring honor and praise to our Lord.

Amen.