

Aud 20

Side A Staley Lecture: Dr. Lynn Buzzard "Prophecy to the Bones," November 16, 1994

Side B Dr. Guy Saffold "Values as the Basis for Leadership" [Duplicate of AUD 15a]

[Side A]

Dr. Lynn Buzzard: I can remember, uh, back when I was a little boy in Sunday school. You know you'd have these Sunday school contests where you'd try to go out and bring visitors in and get people to come to church and get points, so I've been working myself on your chapel to try to get people to come who've been, you know, maybe a bit lax about it and I'm delighted that Sam Kane and Kristin Gotye have come today. Would you stand? We're glad to have you here. And I put a lot of pressure on Professor Terry Jones, where are you, did you make it? (paused silence). Oh, and she lied to me, she said she would come today to make up for yesterday. And uh, so any of you have her today for a class? Now would make a point that she was called and was not present?

I'm going to change the topic of what was announced for the remarks this morning because I felt that I really wanted to put a different kind of cap on what I've been suggesting for the last couple of days and in several classes and meetings with the faculty. What I've been trying to suggest on the first occasion was the biblical mandate to acknowledge the lordship of Christ with implications for that lordship in every arena of human endeavor. And if you understand the sovereignty of God like a chariot moving throughout all creation then the Lordship of Christ, then that's an enormous confidence in the face of the storm that comes upon us. And yesterday talking about particularly the engagements of Christians in the arena of law and the legitimacy of that and yet the dangers inherent often in the way in which we carry out that engagement.

This morning I want to turn back to the book of Ezekiel again where we started a couple of days ago, when before Ezekiel was permitted to begin his ministry, before he was ever able to utter a word, he was told to be silent and watch. And God gives him this vision of God on the mobile, portable, chariot as an encouragement to Ezekiel that in the destruction which is to come God still reigns. Then the book of Ezekiel moves throughout the story of Ezekiel's prophecies and the destruction that in fact does occur. And toward the end of the book of Ezekiel, God comes back to Ezekiel again and gives him a couple of other visions; which are to encourage and sustain him as well. And the other vision I want to talk about is precisely the other vision, the other little story of Ezekiel that some of you suggested we have heard a little about, "them bones, them bones, them dry bones".

In the thirty-seventh chapter of Ezekiel God sends Ezekiel out into the valley of dry bones, as it's called. And we read the words as the beginning of that chapter: "The hand of the Lord was upon me and carried me out in the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the midst of the valley that was full of bones. And caused me to pass by them and round about and behold there were very many in the open valley. And lo, they were very dry." Now of course this is a picture, this is a vision of the destruction that has taken place of the nation of Israel. It is kind of a biblical "Apocalypse Now". It is a terrible tragic scene. It is something like those pictures you

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occasionally see on television of the bodies taken out from the burials of a holocaust. It is a mass national grave. It is the picture of the result of the Babylonian cruelty and destruction of Jerusalem. It is the stuff of which Stanley Kubrick makes films. **[5:05]** The enormity of it is so great that Ezekiel says nothing. He walks around and he observes that the bones are very many and very dry. The jackals have done their work. The insects have taken care of what is left and the bones aren't even connected anymore. It is a visual picture of not only the total devastation of Israel and all it hopes and dreams, but a visual picture of the hopelessness and the desperation that anyone who cared for Israel felt. So great is the tragedy that he has nothing to say. His people, his hope, his nation, his family are gone.

Then the question then comes from God to Ezekiel, "Can these bones live? Ezekiel, is there any hope for Israel? Is there any future out there? Is there a sign of life, of recovery here at all? Out of this devastation, out of this tragedy, out of this terribleness, do you see anything, Ezekiel, to latch onto?" Now, I suppose Ezekiel could have tried to decide what the religious answer to that question would be. He might have said, "Oh yes Jehovah God I believe in you, yes I know this is all going to work out. All things work together for good to them who love the Lord and are called to his purpose. There's a silver lining to every cloud. A light at the end of every tunnel. Dream the impossible dream!" A kind of combination of religious optimism and secular optimism, can do spirit. Ezekiel can't do that.

There is no life there to warrant such optimism. He could have just been a realist and said, "No. The death is too great; the destruction too total. There's nothing left, no hope." But it is interesting that Ezekiel doesn't give either of those responses. A superficial yes or a absolute no. Perhaps he's too much of a realist to have some confident yes, but he knows too much about God to say no. So what does he say? He says in the third verse: "And he said to me, 'Son of Man can these bones live?' and I answered, 'Oh Lord God, though knowest.'" Now if we were wiring that in a modern version we'd probably have Ezekiel say, "Beats me", "I don't know", "only you know", "I don't know whether anything can come out of this, only you know". Now that question that God asks of Ezekiel is not a casual one. God does not ask casual questions. Whenever God asks you a question, he's not passing time. When God meets people in the Bible and asks them questions, they are profound moments of spiritual decision making. "Where art thou Adam?", "Who do men say that I am?", "Can these bones live?". **[10:05]** Now if we are right in understanding this tragedy, this vision of this destruction and this valley of bones as a parable, it's a parable that seems to me to have some contemporary relevancies many of us look at the world in which we live. Who can look and walk in the midst of modern Yugoslavia and not say, "there are many bones and they are very dry". Or walk the West Bank of Palestine or Northern Ireland or Timor or thousands of other places where we come to our wits end, and we say, "I don't know if there's any chance for life at all. It's full of death."

We don't have to go overseas to do it. In my own country, you can go to any American city and in a spiritual sense it's full of bones and they are very dry. There's no life. There's no

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vitality. In the American family today one-third of those born today are born outside of a marriage. Over 50%, in many American cities, are born outside of a marriage. But it's not just those born outside of a marriage many of those born in a marriage are latchkey kids with no parenting. The most dangerous place to be, someone suggested on a poster recently, is in a mother's womb. Our media, our culture, our sports, are full of death and corruption. It is not just that young boy who could take a younger six, seven year old and drop him out of a high rise building to his death because the little boy wouldn't steal for him anymore in Chicago. It's not just that boy. It's a culture which is dying and rotting. And you must look at it and if you have any spiritual sensitivity you have to say it's full of bones and it's very dry. And if asked, "Can these bones live?," you have to say "I don't know." You're a fool if you have any other answer. "I don't know."

If revival can ever sweep into this nation's culture, and institutions, and families, and marriages, and entertainment life, can it ever capture the imagination of the principalities and powers of our day? Now after Ezekiel acknowledges he doesn't know, it is interesting that there are two instructions to Ezekiel and that is what I want to focus on. Two instructions that I think are the Word of the Lord for us today; facing our own valleys of death and destruction. In the fourth verse: "Again, he said to me, 'Prophecy unto these bones, and say to them, 'Oh you dry bones, hear the word of the Lord.'" Now talk about tough audiences. You know most of us when we speak like to get a little feedback. You know you like to have if you tell a joke; it's nice if somebody laughs. It's good when you leave if somebody says "Well I appreciated that." You know we all like some feedback. In fact there have been lots of studies that say you can sort of control what somebody says when you give them positive feedback. And yet Ezekiel is now told to go out to the valley of the dry bones of death and preach to them. Talk to the bones. [15:00] Go out and preach a sermon to them. And what is he supposed to say. He is supposed to say, "Bones, hear the word of the Lord. God is going to come and put you together again."

Now the interesting thing about this preaching to the bones is on the face of it, it looks so foolish and futile. How can talking to the death do anything? Do you ever feel that way in trying to address crises in your life or in the life of your friends, or fellow students, or the culture? How hard it is to talk to the death. Sometimes we even use expressions, you know like you're batting your gums like it's just a waste of time talking to the death. And yet God tells Ezekiel, "Go out there to the death and preach to it. Tell it the word of God. No matter that this sounds foolish, that it appears that nothing could possibly happen by preaching to the death, do it anyway." And Ezekiel does. And something in fact does happen from which we get this little negro spiritual song about the bones, because we're told that as Ezekiel preaches to the death, to the bones, the bones begin to come together. "So I prophesied", verse seven, "as I was commanded and as I prophesied there was a noise and behold a shaking and the bones came together bone to its bone. And when I beheld, lo the sinews and the flesh came upon them and the skin covered them." Something does happen. God uses the foolishness of preaching, as it says in the New Testament.

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No matter how silly it may seem to declare to the word of God to the lawyer, to the moviemaker, to the artist, to the secularist pagan, to the hedonist, God says, "In the midst of the death no matter how dry it is you go out there and you declare that God will act". And we get in the text, as Jerry lee Lewis I guess would say, "a whole lot a shakin' goin' on." I mean there's a whole lot of these bones rattling around. And the bones begin to come together. But, notice the text says, after the bones come together, "but there was no breath in them". The bones come together, something does happen, but there's no breath in them.

You know, we've had no shortage in western culture and American society of religious people and of secular people who come together who talk about the crises of our age. We've had crime commissions, we've had drug czars, we abound in marriage counseling centers. We have secularist and Christians alike bemoaning the loss of values and principles in our society. We have a famous American sociologist Amitai Etzioni, who has pled with America to recover its sense of community and you can't have a culture without community. You can't have any meaningful society when the only value that exists is me and getting what I want and my individualism and my success and my fulfillment. There is no shortage of both spiritual prophetic words and cultural commentary. We've had the year of the child. We've had the year of this and the year of that, we have federal commissions, state commissions, think tanks, but no life. I sat with the chairman of the North Carolina state legislature which had called a special session to deal with the issue of crime. We were talking and I turned to him and said "It doesn't make any difference what laws you pass. You cannot do anything about it." No life. **[19:58]**

This last year, you know when you get older, my kids say "part of getting older is you start developing dysfunctional habits." According to my son, one of my dysfunctional habits is getting interested in gardening. He says, "that's a clear sign. That and doing historical tours." They say, "Those are two signs of Alzheimer's on the way." Well I have gotten kind of fascinated with gardening so I bought some pumpkin seeds. And I thought I'm just going to have lots of pumpkins. I planted these seeds and sure enough, I had vines crawling all over my back yard. I was imagining all the pumpkins I would have. I was ready to set up a pumpkin stand and sell pumpkins. I had vines that were growing like a foot a day. They were going all over the place. When it was all over, I had no pumpkins. All vines. No fruit. Lots of action lots of energy, but no product. That's what happens when all there is, is talking to the bones. Lots of shaking, lots of noise, no breath. And you can preach all you want to the death and that alone brings no life. It doesn't bring it in your own heart. It doesn't bring it in your own marriages. It doesn't bring it in your family. It doesn't bring it in your church. It doesn't bring it in your community. It doesn't bring it in your nation.

And so God turns to Ezekiel and gives him the second command. "Then He said to me, 'prophecy unto the wind. prophecy son of man and say to the wind, "Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds oh breath and breathe upon these slain that they may live.' So I prophesied as He commanded and the breath came into them and they lived and stood upon their

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feet an exceeding great army. Now God says to Ezekiel, "okay Ezekiel, you've done what I've asked you to do, you've preached the word unto the death. Now Ezekiel I want you to talk to God. Now Ezekiel, call on the Spirit. Now Ezekiel turn from the death and turn to the Spirit of God and say 'Come Spirit. Come wind and blow upon this death and give it life. Come from the four corners of the earth. Come and do what only you can do. Come and give life. Spirit of the living God breathe on these bones.'" When we ever tire of doing all we can to save somebody's marriage, to save our own spiritual and emotional health, to save our culture, to save the law, when we preach to the bones and all we got was noise, it's time to turn to the wind, to the Spirit, and say, "God come and do what you can do and only you can do. Come and breathe into our communities and our nations. Let your Spirit step into this marriage, to step into my studies, to step into my ministry. I've done all I can do. I've preached, I've talked to the bones, there's no breath. Come Spirit and give your life. Breathe on these things."

You know even in pagan cultures there's an understanding of the need for somebody to breath into the idol. You may have read accounts in some cultures where they'll carve a little idol and then some religious figure a priest or something and try (breathing heavily as if to blow) to get it to come to life. [25:07] Because the idol is nothing if it doesn't have life. We can't breathe life into anything. All your studies, and all your skills, and all your clever management, and all your exegetical skills, can't breathe an instant's breath into death. Only the Spirit of God can do that. How often have we as a church heard the first command to Ezekiel to prophecy to the bones, and we preach, and we study, and form committees, and organizations, and techniques, and new techniques and have forgotten after we've done that to turn to the spirit of God and say "God I have done what you have and now I hand it to you"? I can't do the next thing." What would have happened at the tomb of Lazarus if Thaddeus had stepped up and said, "Lazarus, come forth!"? Nothing. Only when the word of the Lord comes, come to life, does anything happen. "Lazarus come forth." When said by the Spirit, by the word of God gives life; otherwise, it's all noise. You want to change a culture for Christ? You want to change a marriage? You want to change the church? You want to change youth? You want to see holy, balanced and disciplined lives? You want to see communities that are good for children and good for people growing? Do all you can to preach to the bones, but then you better, when having done that, turn and say, "Lord God of Hosts, I cannot do this. You must come and give life." You remember the children's little story? Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall; Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. And who was it that couldn't put him back together again? All the kings' horses and who else? All the kings men. You know as little child one time heard that story and the little child would bore inside that little story than most of us had ever had said, "Well? All the kings' horses and all the kings men couldn't put humpty dumpty back together again. What about the king?" What if we asked the king to come, could the king put Humpty Dumpty back together again? You know I had never thought about that. The king is missing in the story. In a spiritual sense, our society, with no great surprise to anyone that's read the book

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of Romans, is falling apart. Humpty Dumpty has had an enormous fall. And all the kings committees and all the study groups and all the therapies can’t put Humpty Dumpty back together again. Maybe somebody needs to call the king to say “Spirit of the living God come and breathe on these dead bones that they might live.”

Our little music group is going to come and lead in a song about letting the Spirit fill our lives. (applause)

[30:00]

[End Side A]

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