

“Dry Bones Live”
May 23, 2021

Ezekiel 37:1-14
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Rushing wind, tongues of fire, vivid reds—Pentecost engages our senses and our imagination. There is something strange and unfamiliar here—that speaks to us in these strange and unfamiliar days. And beneath, behind, and beyond the unusual events that we speak of on this day are the common ways in which God’s Spirit empowers us for work both great and small, both extraordinary and ordinary.

Years in the wilderness shaped the life of the Hebrew people. They imagined God and spoke of God using the analogy of the fierce desert wind. It would arise suddenly, prove incapable of being bound, possess enormous power, and then disappear.

When the early Christians—raised and nurtured as Jewish people—told of their experience during the Jewish feast of Pentecost, they turned to those wilderness images and desert memories: “Suddenly there came from the sky what sounded like a strong, driving wind, a noise which filled the whole house where they were sitting . . .”

This morning, then, let us listen to the ancient prophet, Ezekiel, to better understand not only Pentecost and the Spirit of God but also our own lives today—and the Spirit of God.

Ezekiel stands in the middle of a valley.

It is filled with bones and they are very dry.

In the midst of desolation, God asks the prophet: “Mortal, can these bones live?”

These bones, a brief note in my Bible tells me, are the Jewish exiles, taken away from the smoldering Jerusalem after its destruction and held captive in Babylon. “They have no more hope of rebuilding the kingdom of Israel than of putting flesh on a skeleton and calling it to life.”

God will soon tell Ezekiel that “These bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’”

For over a year now we have been like exiles in our own city, banished to our homes, venturing out to a few stores, a park, or the neighborhood sidewalks. If not “cut off completely,” we have certainly experienced painful distance from family, friends, and congregation. We know that Zoom is no substitute for actually being present with others. There have even been times when many have felt that they had lost hope, lost purpose, lost a vision for the days we have lived through and the days ahead.

“Can these bones live?”

Is there any future?

What do you think, Ezekiel?

Beyond our difficult individual lives, these are challenging and precarious times for our nation as it continues to teeter on the brink. As a nation we seem cut off—cut off from what decency we once had, cut off from the basic respect of one another that makes democracy possible,

cut off from what we thought was a deeply rooted sense that we are a nation created from many nations, recognizing that we are all created equal, all endowed with certain unalienable rights.

“Can these bones live?”

Is there any future?

What do you think, Ezekiel?

And beyond our nation are the nations of the world, still struggling for life in the grip of this pandemic; still knowing violence and warfare in so many places, still threatened by a climate that has changed because of our actions and that continues to change because of our inaction.

“Can these bones live?”

Is there any future?

What do you think, Ezekiel?

Ezekiel admits the limits of his own faith, his own confidence.

He won’t say for himself, but he affirms: “*You* know, O God, if these bones can live.”

In of our own confusion, doubt, and uncertainty, we begin to sense the working of the Spirit of God.

After all, faith is not certainty. It even has been said that certainty, not doubt, is the opposite of faith. So it is that the late Krister Stendahl, New Testament scholar and Lutheran Bishop of Stockholm, suggested that we should invoke the Spirit when we are uncertain, when we do not know, when we are facing new situations.¹ When the road ahead isn’t clear, when we’re struggling to see the right thing to do *and* to then actually do it, we might know the working of the Spirit of God in us and among us and through us.

When something new is coming into being—as in these days, filled with challenge and opportunity here and around the world—we might be experiencing the life-giving breath of the Spirit of God.

The presence of the Spirit is perplexing as much as it is comforting. The Spirit comes—as Jesus promised—when we *don’t* know, when we are at a loss. When the forces around us are silencing and accusing us, the Spirit comes to give voice and to advocate for God’s new creation.

When we stare at our own dry bones, our own dashed hopes, our own broken dreams, it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God blowing upon us.

When we stare at the dry bones of justice denied, of rights restricted, of truth left in shambles by ongoing lies, it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God inspiring our renewed hope.

When we stare at the dry bones of pandemic, of warfare, it is faith, not certainty, that first feels the reviving breath of God enabling us to act in new, life giving ways.

These are times when we find ourselves saying with Ezekiel: “I don’t know—*but, you, O God know,*” because the Spirit is at work and God is breathing new life into us when we are uncertain, when we are perplexed, when the new is coming into being.

In these days, as the effectiveness of vaccines is becoming widely apparent, we find ourselves living with the uncertainty of the new and, we might say, in a time of the Spirit.

The CDC tells me I can take off my mask, but I still wear it most places, thank you, as do many others.

The CDC tells us we can worship together in this space once more. Some respond, saying: “I’ll be right over.” Others say: “Not so fast.”

What will we do—and when?

We *are certain* that we miss each other, that we want to be together.

What this congregation will be once we *are together* is not as certain. The pandemic has changed each of us in some ways that we recognize and in some ways that we might not yet see. And when all the changed people that we are get together once more as a *congregation* we will be changed *as a congregation* as well.

What have we become?

And what are we becoming?

This is a time, I think, for speaking and listening—hearing the new and renewed voices of each other, speaking with honesty, listening from heart, being willing to speak and hear even when what we speak and what we hear are uncomfortable. Now is the time to talk with each other in our own strange languages and to listen to the strange word and visions of others so that the Pentecost miracle of understanding might happen among even us.

Like the desert wind, the Spirit of God arises suddenly, proves incapable of being bound, possesses enormous power, and then disappears.

And dry bones come to life.

A year ago, we had no idea how any of this was going to play out. Even now I’m living with the sense that there are still many new challenges ahead—and many new possibilities as well.

God's Spirit blows in what we might call an “Easterly” direction, away from death and decay, away from the confines of regrets over the past, away from missed opportunities in the present. The Spirit of God blows toward resurrection, toward new life.

We can't control God's Spirit, but occasionally, as with the wind, we can feel its presence in our lives, in this congregation. And if we are open to that presence, we will find faith—not certainty, but faith—as we face the new situations of the coming months.

Let us be open to and seize this great opportunity.

These are times that call for the best in each one of us. They call us to abide in the love that is God, to nurture the deep community that we have with each other and to welcome others into this community, to live with compassion toward the world, to think before we act, to bring life out of the death of our age.

And dry bones shall live.

¹ Krister Stendahl, *Energy for Life*, pg. 43, 44.