

Ezekiel 37:1-14

¹The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” ⁴Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. ⁵Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.

⁷So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. ⁸I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. ⁹Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” ¹⁰I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

¹¹Then he said to me, “Mortal, 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.’ ¹²Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. ¹³And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. ¹⁴I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.”

Can These Bones Live?

May 20, 2018

Every time I feel the Spirit movin' in my heart, I will pray. Every time I feel the Spirit movin' in my heart, I will pray. Up on the mountain my Lord spoke, out of his mouth came fire and smoke. Jordan River is chilly and cold; chill de body but not de soul! O every time I feel the Spirit movin' in my heart, I will pray. O every time I feel the Spirit movin' in my heart, I will pray.

Well Happy Pentecost everyone! The Spirit has arrived and continues to surprise and challenge us to be renewed in our own spirits, doesn't it?

Now you may think that this is a really odd reading for this day of Pentecost, the day we normally remember the birthday of the church and the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is, however, one of the assigned readings for this Sunday and one that really speaks to me, so I want to share a few thoughts about that. I hope you will tag along with me today.

I couldn't help but be drawn to this desolate scene that Ezekiel spells out for us. Dry bones in a valley of death. I can just imagine it, can't you? Dry like the middle east, with mountains on every side. The sun shining down, hot and no trace of humidity. Dusty and desolate! Ezekiel has been having a vision. A vision of standing in the middle of a valley full of dried bones. Death and despair in every direction with God asking him a question about whether these bones can live?

We know from history that this is about the community of Israel which has been defeated and carried off to captivity by King Nebuchadnezzar and all they once knew and loved is gone or a memory. The temple was destroyed (for the first time) and now the God they needed and worshipped had no place on this earth, no

earthly home and they are feeling dead, lonely for God, hopeless, overwhelmed with grief and regret and longing for what was.

It is into this type of pain that God says to Ezekiel to “preach to the dry bones” that the wind may come and knit them back together. This is God’s promise that he will send the Holy Spirit to breathe life back into us that we might live again. Be restored to wholeness of spirit. The word used for the wind is “Ruach”, a wonderful word that sounds just like it should, doesn’t it? Say it with me “Ruach”. The same word used in the creation story when God sent the wind over the waters of the earth filled with creative power, a wind that continues to blow in our lives.

And it has me wondering if you’ve ever felt like those exiled Hebrews? That your hope is lost? That your bones, your spirit, felt dried up? That you felt completely cut off from the things you loved and were powerless to change anything? That the system is rigged, and you can’t get ahead? The powers of the world are against you and you feel hopeless and broken? You feel tired, and just want to lay down in this valley of bones and play dead? I know I have. And I can’t help but think that that’s how the disciples must have been feeling as well.

They had been following Jesus for some time now. He’d taught them everything he could. For a while, they were certain that something big was about to happen and a new kingdom would be established. They had high hopes. And then the unthinkable happened. Jesus was crucified. He was dead. And then something even more unthinkable happened. He rose again and came among them to encourage them and then just as suddenly, he disappeared. What an upside-down, topsy-turvy world they had been living in.

And now, they have been learning to live in the world without Jesus being physically present and while there had been encounters with him they are feeling on their own for the moment. Maybe it has taken some time to understand all the things Jesus had been telling them. Maybe it has taken some time for them to gather together again after abandoning Jesus during his last hours. I’m sure they have had some dark hours and some real soul searching asking themselves the same questions we ask when we feel alone and distant from God. Where is God? How can we live in a world that is so hateful and cruel? Where is the Holy Spirit that was promised and how does that make any difference when I’m lying in a hospital bed with cancer, or a tornado or flood just destroyed my entire community, or I can’t find any work or health care, or there are just too many hungry people to feed.

The disciples have been gathering together for some time now, praying, meditating, and remembering Jesus and the example he gave them. And in the midst of that culmination of prayer, who knows what happened! It certainly felt like a rush of wind and a burning flame and suddenly, they are out on the street proclaiming the message to all that would listen, that Jesus is the one they seek. Jesus is the Lord and Messiah that they have been looking for and all they need to do is repent. Change directions. “Hey, Everybody, God is here.” Hope is possible! Dry bones can indeed come back to life in the Spirit of God! Hearts of stone can be made to beat again! Goodness can be found in our despair!

And perhaps that is what the Spirit does for us as well. Restoring us and healing us. Giving us the courage to come alive and maybe even take to the streets ourselves? To knit our dry bones back together again, to put hope back into our lives, that we might know God’s Spirit and Live! Even when it seems our lives are falling apart. Courage to get back on the bus, which we were challenged to do last week.

There is a wonderful moment in the book “The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe” by C.S. Lewis, where Aslan the great lion, the son of the Emperor over the sea has returned to Narnia to defeat the White Witch who has, by her evil magic, made it so it is always winter and never Christmas in Narnia. The story is an allegory of the

Gospel stories. I highly recommend them. The witch has a nasty habit of turning her enemies into stone statues which she gathers in her frozen castle. I sometimes think that is what life does to us sometimes too.

Towards the end of the story Aslan comes upon all those she has turned to stone; Dogs and cats, giants, rabbits, panthers and lions, all kinds of creatures including dear Mr. Tumnus the Fawn. And one by one he breathes on them and slowly, at first from the edges like a piece of paper set on fire, they come back to life. Life returns to them when they were dry bones (or stone bones) into which the breath of life has been breathed. This is how I like to think about the breath of God bringing us back to life, little by little as well.

And how like them we have been at times not only individually but also as a community. Dry bones, ‘clack, clack’, and maybe some of you have been feeling a bit dry too? Feeling parched and dry and stretched as I think Bilbo Baggins said in the Lord of the Rings “I feel thin, sort of stretched, like butter scraped over too much bread.” And into our dryness, God says “I send my spirit, the wind, Ruach. I send it to you that you may live and know that I am God. Turn you face into it and trust that I am there.”

Lutheran Pastor Janet Hunt¹ shared these wonderful thoughts on our readings today and I’ll close with these.

In her story, she shared that a few weeks ago all those farming folks out in the middle of the country, out there in Missouri and Minnesota, and the Dakotas, started plowing their fields to get ready for spring planting. And as the wind blew across the country it picked up that dust and dirt and when it rained it dropped it right on the folks in Northern Illinois, raining as much dirt as water, sending most of them to the car wash to clean it up.

And it dawned on her as she considered our Pentecost readings today that the wind has no boundaries. It doesn’t care at all about the artificial lines we draw between us. It simply doesn’t matter to the wind if the soil last lived in South Dakota or in Iowa before it found a new home on her SUV there in Northern Illinois.

She goes on to say, “More than this, the wind does not discriminate in terms of who or what it picks up and carries. If something is in the path of the wind, if the wind is strong enough it will carry it along. The wind is a metaphor for the working of the Spirit. We hear this in the wondrous vision encountered by the prophet Ezekiel where the breath (the wind) reinvigorates *all* those dry bones, bringing life where there was death, new hope where there was only despair. And we hear of it as the disciples were gathered together in one place and the Holy Spirit made its presence known with the ‘rush of a violent wind.’ In both cases, the ‘wind’ shows no discrimination. *All* the bones were re-assembled and had life breathed into them once more. *Everyone* who was gathered ‘heard and understood.’ Indeed, as Peter speaks, he points to the ancient words of the prophet Joel who dreamed of a time when God’s Spirit would be poured out upon *all* flesh. On *everyone* within reach.

You can harness the wind. You can work with it or around it. You can usually stay ‘out of the wind’ to avoid it. But you can’t stop it. You cannot stop it. And oh, isn’t this a marvelous word of hope and promise for Christ’s Church today? Isn’t this precisely what we need to be reminded of when we find ourselves weighed down by fear, by grief, by wishing things were as they once were, but know they will never be again?

For you cannot stop the wind, and you cannot stop a Pentecost Wind when it reflects the movement of the Holy Spirit, whose sole purpose is to bring life to places of death, understanding to ears which could not comprehend, and salvation to all who yearn for it!” ¹Reverend Janet Hunt @ www.dancingwiththeword.com

And so, on this day of Pentecost, we stand with all those who seek, and all those who long for God, all those who long to be understood, all those who carry burdens and pain in their hearts, and we sing together, “*Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Melt me; mold me; fill me; use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.*”

Thanks be to God! Amen.