

Can These Bones Live?

Acts 2: 1-18

Ezekiel 37:1-14

On this Pentecost Sunday we see two communities raised from the dead by God's Spirit: Israel and the Church.

The question God asks Ezekiel can be our question at points in our lives: *Can These Bones Live?* The bones of our lives, of our family, of our church, of *the* Church, the bones of our nation. Can these dry bones live?

From the beginning of the Bible to the end we see that there is no life apart from the Spirit of God: The Spirit that hovered over the face of the deep on the first day of creation; the Spirit that God's breath breathed into the first human and made him a living soul; the Spirit that overshadowed Mary's flesh and brought forth Jesus into the world; the Spirit that anointed and empowered Jesus for his mission as the Son of God in the world; the Spirit that filled the mind of the writer of the Book of Revelation as he wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor and challenged them to listen to what the Spirit was saying. From beginning to the end.

But perhaps the two most vivid stories of the Spirit in the Bible are the vision given to Ezekiel of a valley of dry bones brought to life and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost that brought the church into being.

I

At the end of Luke's gospel as a prelude to Luke's sequel, the Book of Acts, the Risen Jesus says to his disciples: You will be my witnesses throughout the whole world beginning in Jerusalem.

And see I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high. (Luke 24:49).

My guess is that the disciples were raring to go and preach the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth. But Jesus said, Wait! Hold your horses. Wait until the Spirit comes. In other words: *Don't Do Something; Just Stand There!*

They were ready to set off without the Spirit, like the fabled Civil War general who jumped on his horse and rode off in all directions at once.

But Jesus said wait. Wait for the Spirit. I'm not sure Pentecost ever happens without our waiting for the Spirit, praying for the Spirit.

II

Then it happened. Pentecost happened. The disciples were gathered in a room in Jerusalem, waiting. It was the Jewish festival of Pentecost and there were Jews from all over the world there for the Feast Day.

Then the Spirit blew into the room with a mighty force. Then the Spirit rested on each of them with divided tongues as of fire on their heads. They began to speak and sing in the Spirit.

Then the Spirit blew into the streets, and people in the streets began to speak and sing in the Spirit.

Some of the critics looking on (there are always critics looking on) said, They are drunk!

But Peter stood and delivered the first of his sermons in *Acts*. We are not drunk, he said, it's just 9 o'clock in the morning! (I don't know why that's funny to me. I know a lot of people who start at 9 a.m.) The prophesy of Joel is coming to pass, he said. Then he recited Joel's prophecy:

“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh”, declares the Lord.

“And your sons and you daughters shall prophesy (or preach).

And your young folk will see visions

And your old folk will dream dreams.” (You are never too old to dream dreams.)

Then Joel reiterated:

Upon my servants, male and female, I will pour out my Spirit, *and they shall prophesy*. (Acts 2:17-18).

This past week, Al Mohler, the President of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, my alma mater, wrote a column decrying the ordination of three women to be ministers at the largest Southern Baptist Church in the nation, Saddleback Church in California, where Rick Warren is pastor.

Earlier in the year he had declared that God had chosen only the male voice to deliver the gospel. In this column he said that the ordination of women was a departure from scripture and if such things continued to happen, the Southern Baptist Convention would die.

I think Joel would disagree, as well as the writer of Acts. We cannot control the Spirit, and the Spirit calls whom the Spirit calls. The larger church is so blessed today with the emergence of women called to preach and pastor churches. The Spirit is blowing through the church.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, the Spirit is like the wind. You can't see where it comes from or where it will go. You can't see the Spirit at all; what you see are its effects.

Pentecost is called the birthday of the church. You might also call a resurrection. What was dead is now alive.

III

Now we turn back in the Bible and back in time to Ezekiel's vision. God had called Ezekiel to be a prophet at a most terrible point in Israel's history, just before its fall, when Babylon conquered the nation, destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and took the Hebrew people into Babylonian captivity. At first he was called as a prophet of judgment, saying that the nation would fall because of its sins. Then "after the fall", he was called to be a prophet of *hope* to the nation destroyed. No wonder some people thought that Ezekiel had severe psychological problems. His wild visions didn't help his reputation. Like the one about the heavenly creatures and the wheels within wheels and the one about the fiery chariot in the skies. Some Jewish authorities later wanted to toss the book out of the Hebrew Bible, but it survived. Battles over the Bible are as old as the Bible itself.

Ezekiel's most famous vision is today's text. The nation of Israel was as dead as a doornail, as the expression goes—though I have no idea what a doornail is. But God gave to Ezekiel a vision that brought hope to the nation—and to us as well.

The Hand and Spirit of God led Ezekiel to a valley—most probably the terrible battlefield where Babylon slaughtered Israel’s army. The valley was filled with bones. The Lord led Ezekiel through the valley and all the dry bones and said: *Son of Man, can these bones live?*

Ezekiel responded, “O Lord God, you know!” He may well have thought, “Why are you asking *me?*”

Then God said: “Prophesy over these bones and say, ‘O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord’.” (Are you beginning to hear the black spiritual, “Dem Bones?”)

Then Ezekiel preached the Word of the Lord:

I will cause breath to enter you and you will live again. I will lay sinews upon you and cover you with flesh, and form skin over you. And I will put breath into you, and you will live again.

As Ezekiel was prophesying to the bones there came a rattling and the bones began to come together, “bone meeting bone,” the text says. Toe bone up! Then the sinews appeared and the flesh and the skin. But something was missing. The breath. No Spirit was in them.

So God said to Ezekiel, “Now go prophesy to the Spirit. Say to the breath: ‘Come from the four winds and breathe into these slain that they may live again.’”

So Ezekiel did, and the breath of God entered them, and they all came alive, “the vast multitude” of them.

Ezekiel must have been staggered by the vision, wondering at the meaning of it. So God interpreted the vision:

O mortal, these bones are the *whole house of Israel*. They say, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost. We are clean cut off.”

Have you ever felt “clean cut off”? “Prophesy then”, God said, “preach these words to Israel”:

Thus says the Lord God: “I will open your graves, I will lift you out of your graves, I will bring you back to the land of Israel.”

A nation brought back to life. Resurrected.

IV

This is God’s word to us today. A word of hope and promise and new life.

Will we hear the word of the Lord? I think we can—if we recognize our need of the Spirit and ask for it. This is why the church needs Pentecost Sunday every year, to help us hope for rebirth and new life in the Spirit.

Sometimes talk of the Holy Spirit seems nebulous, abstract.

One of my favorite Pentecost hymns is *Come Holy Ghost, Our Souls*

Inspire:

Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire

and kindle with celestial fire.

Thou, the anointing art,

Who dost thy seven-fold gifts impart.

What are the seven-fold gifts of the Spirit? I looked it up! They come from the prophet Isaiah:

...the Spirit of wisdom and understanding

the Spirit of counsel and strength

the Spirit of knowledge of the Lord

and reverence for the Lord. (Isaiah 11:2-3)

That's six. Isaiah adds one more:

Delight in the reverence of the Lord.

Reverence is the doorway to these gifts of the Spirit. Reverence begins in the deep recognition of our human limitations, the limits of our goodness, wisdom and strength. It is the expression of our utter need of God. It is *humility*, which knows our human frame and knows our need of God.

Which of these seven gifts would you ask for today? You can, you know.

True prayer begins when our prayers run out. So first we pray for the Spirit that, as Paul wrote, helps us pray when we cannot.

V

We as a church have come through the year of the pandemic. You may have felt “clean cut off”. You may feel that today. All the churches I know have suffered blows from their year apart. One observer spoke of people in churches today as anxious, angry and afraid. But the pandemic can also be a portal to a better, newer life together for us and the world. Indian novelist Arunhati Roy has written about this year:

Historically, pandemics have forced people to break with the past and imagine the world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

Can Joel’s prophecy come true for us?

The Spirit poured out on us all
 women and men prophesying
 young folk seeing visions
 old folk dreaming dreams
 middle aged folk running to catch up?

It can, as we see our dry, dusty bones and pray for the Spirit.

VI

One of my favorite modern hymns of the Holy Spirit is *Draw Us In the Spirit's Tether*. May it be our closing prayer today:

Draw us in the Spirit's tether,
for when humbly in thy name
two or three are met together,
Thou are in the midst of them;
Alleluia!
Alleluia!
Touch we now Thy garment's hem.

As disciples used to gather
in the name of Christ to sup,
Then with thanks to God the Giver
break the bread and bless the cup,
Alleluia!
Alleluia!
So now knit our friendship up.

So now knit our friendship up.

Amen

So here is the blessing, the benediction: In the words of the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi:

Be a lamp, or lifeboat, or a ladder. Help someone's soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.

Go now in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.