

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The 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. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I 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.'

So 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. I 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. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, 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.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then 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." Therefore 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. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I 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.'

Acts 2:1-12

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' (603)

Happy birthday, church. Today is our birthday, the day when the Holy Spirit came down—maybe for the first time or maybe in a new way, depends who you ask. That’s a question for the pneumatologists out there, the theologians who specialize in thinking about the Holy Spirit. Pneumatology: was this a new dispensation of God or a renewed one. Not a pneumatologist myself, I go back and forth on that question. Maybe this was the same spirit spoken of in the beginning, when a wind blew over the face of the darkened deep: *Ruah*. Maybe this was the same spirit the Lord God breathed into the nostrils of the man he formed out of the dust of the ground: *Ruah*. Maybe this was the same spoken of as Wisdom, even Lady Wisdom, *Shekinah*, throughout the Wisdom Literature of the Second Temple Period.

I guess the question comes down to whether the church appears as in continuity with what’s come prior or if it’s something radically new—which is a similar question as the resurrected life. Is it total transformation or a continuity with all that has been before, a fulfillment? Or is at, paradoxically, both—radical transformation and faithful continuity?

In any event, the Holy Spirit in this new arrival came this time to gather people for new purpose, which purpose was this: to gather *all* people for the purpose together of being people, cultivating people, irrespective of type, every one of us full of potential to become fully a person, if only we have other people made fully people to help us on the way. The church would be that. The church was to be that, needs still to be that. Ours is to lift the human being from dust to spirit, to lift all humanity from survivalists to believers in love.

It’s not a given that we’ll answer to the better angels of our nature. We have to be cultivated to do that, encouraged to do that.

Remember the sticker you’d see on windshields and bumpers following 9-11? You see them around still, but less as 2001 retreats further into the past: an image of the twin towers, black verticals, with the impetrative printed somewhere across them or below them or above: “Never Forget.” Included there might be the symbols of the American flag, red, blue, stars, stripes, something unfurling.

I always wonder when I see this sticker what it is *exactly* I’m urged to remember, and why? In what spirit?

The act of remembering can be a powerful one, and it can be put to all sorts of emotional purposes.

It’s worth understanding that the Greek word for truth is *aletheia* which derives from the mythical River of Forgetfulness, the Lethe. The Lethe was the place of forgetting, so *aletheia* is the

act of not forgetting. It also came to mean disclosure, which is also to say revelation, and also truth. Truth, then, is bound up in not forgetting.

But not forgetting so easily slips into something more of deception and less of truth. The project of conjuring up what's to be remembered can so easily put to purposes other than the truth. Because our memory is fungible, and events past are mutable in their being remembered. History is a fabrication, its recounting is an act of power. Who does the remembering, how the narrative of what happened is constructed: these are functions of power. History belongs to the winners, it's said. This, because they're the ones around to tell the story. Chances are good they'll tell it so they're in a good light, they're established as right, their victory is thought just, even predetermined, preordained.

This scene from the prophecy of Ezekiel is an evocative one. You might know it. You might have some memory of it. Even if you don't know much of the Bible, even if you know still less of the Book of Ezekiel (which is the case for most people), you might know this scene. It has crept into our popular consciousness by way of the Negro Spiritual *Dem Bones*, with its tight harmonies and its half-step tonal ascent and its merriment in sound. There's something mischievous in dem bones, something working happily against the usual way of things. The song practically begged to be illustrated, so it was, cartoon bones finding one another eventually to become a standing, and then dancing skeleton. One video of it was apparently made for elementary school classrooms as an early science lesson in the 90s. Find it on YouTube and notice all the comments: "I remember this from kindergarten!" "I haven't heard this song since first grade!" And then this one: "I never noticed the 'Hear the word of the Lord' part."

The funny thing is, it's not clear that merriment is what's being envisioned here, what Ezekiel is made to envision here. Really, merriment might have been the furthest feeling from his heart. After all, Ezekiel prophesied during the worst part of the crisis of ancient Israel and Judah. He lived through the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, the taking of the people Judah into exile to join the people Israel who, as a kingdom, had already been crushed—to join those in exile who'd survived, that is, those who hadn't been left to die amidst the rubble. And he died prior to when hope had begun to dawn that there would ever be a chance to return and rebuild. It's believed he died in Mesopotamia in the year 570 BCE, fourteen years after all the destruction, when the trauma and shock was just beginning to find reason, and thirty-four years prior to the time of return, rebuilding.

Really, this valley of dry bones is a mass grave, and what Ezekiel is made to witness is an act of remembering literally, re-membering as the opposite of dismembering, the coming back together and connecting once again bone to its bone. Reconnected by sinews, which word is used interchangeably in later biblical writing with “ligaments,” it calls to mind what is essential to religious practice, “religion” breaking down to be “re-ligio.” This is a tying back, or a connecting or binding again. Religious practice can be strictly understood, then, as that which has the power to bind a people to one another and bind a people back to their origin, back to God, just as these bones were bound together once again bone to its bone, the structure of a people who just might once again live.

Religion is a binding in body and spirit just as ligaments bind in body.

The thing is, religious practice isn’t an unalloyed good. The biblical understanding of religious practice isn’t as an incorruptible activity. The God whom we meet in the Bible is as often disapproving of religious practice as he is approving of it, disapproving of what binds as he is approving of it—because religious practice, these ties that bind, is something that can be done in any manner of spirit, it is a practice that can put to any number of ends.

Like, those resurrected bones, those risen from this mass grave, who were laid there no doubt by an enemy doing something violent and horrific: what might these people do now that they were alive again?

The act of remembering: it can take on a religious power, which is not an unalloyed good, can indeed be put to purposes very much not good—for, yes, the Holy Spirit can bind people together, but so can what we might call unholy spirits. Remembering, this in part a practice of religion, can result in stoked grievance, can then be put to violent purpose in service of vengeance. This can be done perhaps even more easily than it can empower a faithful acceptance of what has been and good hope for what might be. Really, history’s worst atrocities have been made possible by a quasi-religious stoking of ancient, and often fabricated, grievance. Mussolini did it, Hitler did it, Milosevic did it, rally, rally the people—invoke an ancient or imagined crime committed by “them” against “us,” which *they’ve* continued to do, trying to destroy *us* ever since, for as long as can be remembered. But they won’t get away with that anymore. They’ll meet with comeuppance because we won’t be defeated! Our days of humiliation are over! We’re back! We’re taking it all back!

See, those who assert that religion is the cause of all that’s wrong with the world aren’t themselves altogether wrong. They just don’t have a good understanding of what religion is, this

which you'd find at a Trump rally just as much as you would in an old wooden meetinghouse on a Sunday morning.

Do you wonder what those dry bones might have done once they'd rallied, once they were brought back together and made bound to one another with ligaments and made warm with flesh and then filled with the breath of God so to live again, to live as a whole and gathered people once again? Do you wonder if perhaps they'd risen and stood so to seek after the *them* who'd reduced them to dry bones in the first place? Might they have used their living breath to pant after the enemy who'd made of this landscape a mass grave and made of this people defeated unto death?

Have you ever seen the likes of this in recent popular entertainment? Horror movies, monster movies will show someone who's been apparently killed but who seems to be getting up, snapping its parts back into shape. Often seen through the eyes of a mere mortal who knows that what they're seeing isn't right, the movie doesn't have the audience thinking, "This should go well," but rather, "Oh no..."

As for this valley of dry bones, as for this whole house, this whole people, who'd been mowed down by history, in this case the whole house of Israel but throughout history any number of peoples and nations, flattened by violence, blitzed out of existence, reduced to shadow and ash in a moment's atomic explosion: what's their plan? What's the Lord got in mind with this resurrection? What's Ezekiel being made to see?

The told-of vision doesn't say explicitly what their rising would have them do. The last we see of them is a promise, a promise of what shall be. They've been placed on their own soil, they've been let to live, which just might prove enough for them, by grace perhaps even more than enough.

And maybe that's why the Negro spiritual of this prophetic vision implies such merriment as I think it does. As with those enslaved who first sang the song, what landed these dry bones in this mass grave was horrific violence, gross injustice. But true freedom from this intolerable state isn't about grabbing the opportunity to exact revenge. It's about merrily, joyfully moving into freedom from the past altogether, moving into the future in an altogether different spirit, perhaps even a new spirit.

Depends who you ask.

The story we remember every year on Pentecost doesn't give us much grievance to go with. The Holy Spirit has come down following Jesus having gone up, ascended after being resurrected and spending some time wandering around, showing up here, there, eating some fish, telling his

friends to take care of one another, charging them with peace and promising them an advocate whose coming would make it all the more possible. It's been seven weeks now that we've celebrated Easter, heard of Jesus' several remembered appearances, remembered in the gospel narratives, a strange smattering of random interactions with hardly a pattern to put them all into some understanding.

Except that he was here.

Exactly the same as before.

But also utterly transformed.

But now he'd be gone, never seen again in this same smattering of ways.

Now the spirit would come, this presence of God that would, unlike when incarnate, would be in no one place so that it could be every place.

Pentecost will empower the apostles to take this story everywhere, to include in this story everyone. And they'll remember how it came to this. In the Book of Acts, which Pentecost is but the beginning of, the apostles will speak often of how the leaders of the people had Jesus crucified, but then God raised him, and he appeared to many of them in subsequent arrivals and just as sudden departures, here again, then gone again.

And it always catches my eye, and a bit catches my breath, when they explain how Jesus came to be crucified.

It catches my breath because it's turned into a delicate question over the long history of the church. No, it's turned into a dangerous question, especially if you happen to be a Jew in Russia or Eastern Europe during the Middle Ages and it's Good Friday. That was cause for all sorts of terror come down, Christians going after Jews in a disgusting mis-remembering of the point of it all.

Shame on us.

Pentecost gives us none of that—and perhaps in this way this *is* a new spirit, in that none of its gathering power is to come at the expense of people excluded. None of the power that gathers people in this new dispensation comes with the by-product that certain others are to be deported, displaced. No, on the contrary, everyone is to be seen and understood as rightfully having a place in this grand project: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia. Everyone is to be embraced in this life-giving project, and on their own terms: Judeans and Cappadocians, people from Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs. The list goes on!

I'm not suggesting these encounters will be easy. The urge of the church to embrace the whole world: I'm not blind to all the ways this can become about interpersonal power, to say of geopolitical power, and the persistent human urge to overpower, overpower. It has so become, and it does so become: this, though the power of the Holy Spirit, which comes to us and can even work through us, never does so in order to do *our* bidding in the world.

What I am saying is that the spirited charge to regard all people, all creation, as beloved of God is rather where freedom and joy are to be found. These are its fruits: freedom and joy. These are to be our religion's fruits, the fruits of our practice of remembering in the hope of a good future and a glorious end. Truly, this is how we'll know if our religious practice is true, true to our creator's purpose: we can judge it by its fruits. In fact, we must judge religious practice by its fruits.

Freedom and joy and fulfillment of all good promise: these are what I'm looking for.

I hope I've got the right place.

Happy birthday, church. May our celebrating be the world's joy.

Thanks be to God.