

Pentecost Sunday 2021
Sermon 5.23.21

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...

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?' (577)

Happy birthday, everyone—for this is considered the birthday of the church. (Hence the party favors. Thank you, Amy!) Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down as a rush of a violent

wind and rested on each of the apostles as divided tongues, as of fire: this is considered the birthday of the church.

That's what this passage means—that, with the Holy Spirit, people could hear and understand one another in spite of language barriers; that, with the Holy Spirit, people could conceive of a world shaped by and gathered in by mutual understanding even across fissures and divisions once felt as impassable. The church was to be the means for this gathering in, the place and body politic of such manifest mutual understanding. The church, with its message of love that translates into every language and culture, was to be the embodiment of each person and each people now given a hearing in love.

To speak and to hear in love: it doesn't necessarily mean agreement, but it does mean trust and respect and belief and good faith.

It hasn't always played out that way, of course. The church hasn't always managed to enact such a body politic, such a mutual hearing in love. I know that.

But it often has, its fast growth in its earliest centuries being about the appeal of love. That's our heritage as well. Please remember that.

So, happy birthday.

Interesting that this scene follows a protracted period of waiting—both for them long ago and, as it happens, for us right now. This scene follows the first chapter of Acts, which begins with what we remembered last week in worship, Jesus ascending on a cloud into heaven while the apostles stood watching. That event gives us Ascension Day, the fortieth day after Easter, Resurrection Day. The second half of that first chapter has the apostles returning now from the mount called Olivet and gathering into the upstairs room where they'd been staying—the now eleven apostles, but also all the believers, which numbered around 120.

It was a lot of people who had little to do but wait, just as they'd been told to do. Jesus had said it, his final words to them before being taken up and out of their sight: “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

So, now they had little to do but wait.

Yes, some of them would constantly “devote themselves in prayer.”

And yes, they'd take this time to elect a new twelfth apostle for their ranks. Having lost Judas, they would need someone to take his place.

They would cast lots.

They would decide on Matthias.

And they would wait, continue to wait, just as Jesus had told them to do.

And who knows for how long they'd be made to wait?

And who knows what the thing for which they were waiting would actually look like, would actually feel like?

The Holy Spirit: who knows about this, this thing that had been promised would arrive though it was already here, this thing whose arrival they were to await though it had already *long* been here. *Ruah*, meaning breath or wind: it was the thing there in the beginning, the spirit of God that moved across the face of the deep. It was the wind from God that swept over the face of the waters out of which would emerge the creation, the firmament. It was the wind that blew across the face of the flood by which the waters would recede and the ark of Noah would come to rest and out of which life would emerge once again. It was the wind that blew across the Red Sea to create enough dry land for the once-enslaved Israelites to move through it, light on fleeing foot. It would, though, create not so much dry land that the Egyptian army could also get through, coming after them with horse and chariot, shield and armor. No, they would get stuck in the mire of low tide.

Ruah moved the prophets to prophesy (Isaiah, Jeremiah) and called the people to renewed faithfulness. It filled the dry bones of Ezekiel's seeing, the whole house of Israel that had been cut down and laid to waste in this mass grave; it filled them again with life that they might rise and thrive. Catastrophe had struck. It had laid the people to waste. Decades, centuries had passed. All hope was lost. All memory was lost. But then: *ruah*, wind, the breath of life, and now a perfect balance of bone and breath, bone to its bone and breath, breath, a perfect proportionality of sturdy structure and free flow.

Sturdy structure and free flow: the body alive, any body alive.

For what it's worth, I pray about that a lot, that I strike upon those right proportions. As a person, as a parent, as a pastor: the right proportion of sturdy structure and free flow.

Also for what it's worth, that seems a laudable thing for the church to pray for: to strike upon the right proportion of structure and flow.

We don't always get that right. I know that too. Too focused on doctrine or administration, we can neglect the whim and will of the Spirit; too open to the spirit, we can lose our way. See, those sinews that hold the bone to its bone in Ezekiel's vision: in the Latin

translation of the Old Testament, they are *ligare*, as in “ligament.” This also gives us “religion.” *Religio*: a binding back or again, a binding back of the people one to another, a binding again of the people to their God. See also, the story twice mentions *ligare*, those sinews, those ligaments, and it mentions eight times *ruah*, *pneuma*, the breath of life, the spirit.

That seems like a good proportion to me—two portions of structure to eight portions of spirit.

A meme on a friend’s Facebook wall professed: “A religious person will do what he is told no matter what is right, whereas a spiritual person will do what is right no matter what he is told.” I replied to this straw man argument, “How about those of us who are both?” and then I promised myself once again to quit stupid Facebook, that great ruiner of relationships. So much of what happens on-line is all talk via text and little hearing in love, the opposite of that long ago Pentecost. No, here, on-line, on social media, people who though speak the same language misunderstand each other, or but narrowly understand each other, to a devouring degree.

Waiting, locked away. Waiting, with perhaps too many people in too crowded a space. Waiting in the perhaps lonely closet of each’s own soul, a measure of fear, a measure of confusion, a measure of impatience, and maybe some wish born of exhaustion that what’s to come won’t come and we can all just stay locked away.

“It is finished,” Jesus uttered from the cross, his last words according to John’s gospel. Wouldn’t that be a relief: it is finished? Locked away: it’s not good, but it’s familiar, at least at this point it is. It’s not good, but it’s easy. It’s always easier to do nothing than to do something.

We’re in a strange moment as regards the pandemic. To be fair, every moment amidst the pandemic has been a strange moment—when not scary for those for whom it has been scary.

A long conversation I had with a friend who’s a chaplain at Leahy Clinic reminded me that for many, like her, it has been scary indeed, traumatic even. People were dying alone—those with COVID, those with other maladies. She would watch them through windows offering prayer through thick glass.

Funny that she’s hurting now, though the dying has subsided. Funny that she’s hurting *more* now, though the dying has subsided. She’s confused by her mis-timed emotions about it all. But, no, her friends assured her: she’s at last allowing herself to feel her feelings about it—long-held feelings but well-controlled for her need to keep functioning.

For the rest of us, it’s likely been a milder version of that. Ed Yong writes in a days-old article in *The Atlantic* of this phenomenon, the urgency of feelings that emerge once danger has

passed. “When [people] finally get a chance to exhale, their breaths may emerge as sighs.” And quoting Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, founder and director of the Trauma Stewardship Institute, he writes, “People put their heads down and do what they have to do, but suddenly, when there’s an opening, all these feelings come up.” “Lipsky has spent decades helping people navigate the consequences of natural disasters, mass shootings, and other crises. ‘As hard as the initial trauma is,’ she said, ‘it’s the aftermath that destroys people.’”

But not all people. Some will recover quickly, and may therefore lose patience with those who don’t.

This added to the fact that the virality of this catastrophe eroded “the very social trust and connections that allow communities to recover from catastrophes” and it’s simply the case that, though we might be safe from COVID, we yet have much work of recovery to do. We are not near back to normal and might never be. Tamar Rodney, from the Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing, who studies trauma, explained, “We can’t expect people to go through that and for everyone to come out the other side being fine. People suffered in between...” Jessi Gold, a psychiatrist at the Washington University School of Medicine, said something similar, “I think some people believe we pressed ‘pause,’ and we’ll go back to the way things were before, as if we didn’t have all the intervening experiences, as if 2020 didn’t happen, as if getting a vaccine erases your memory.”

It doesn’t, of course.

But even our own denomination flirted with this, the United Church of Christ. An email I received from some aspect of our new conference had something like this in a headline: “Don’t we all wish 2020 hadn’t happened...?” I deleted the email. That’s just not a helpful way to frame our current dilemma. Because it did happen. So, now what?

As for me, I look back on last winter and feel it like a nightmare, something so distressing while in the midst of it but in retrospect sort of embarrassing that I couldn’t manage it better. But it wasn’t a nightmare. It was real and exhausting and persistent and pervasive and, as a parent with an eye on my children, lonely-making, very lonely-making. The deconstruction of their lives! School, friends, theater, dance, rowing, starting high school, aiming to graduate high school and beginning to think about what’s next—all of this dismembered and left in fragments. It made it very hard for the spirit to sustain itself, to remember itself to us and us to life.

Always hear the religious imperative to remember in contrast to the world’s tendency to dismember.

I never thought I'd relate to that valley of the dry bones quite so much. But here we are.
And yet: Pentecost. The birthday of the church. A new body politic that gathers by the
spirit for a mutual hearing in love, a shared witness to the power of love, a re-membering of
ourselves to one another and us all to God.

Happy birthday, everyone.

Thanks be to God.