Sermon May 23, 2021

Ezekiel, Acts

The gifts of new life to dry bones, the gift of the Holy Spirit preaching God’s joy in new ways – what exciting and otherworldly events we hear in our scripture readings!

Our first reading is full of hope, full of God’s power. A prophet is told to look on a long dead battle field and asked if they might live again. And I simply love the prophet’s response. He doesn’t quickly google the answer or use a lifeline to phone a friend, he just states, “Oh Lord God, you know.” Ha! Ezekiel wasn’t fooled. God is the one who has the power to resurrect, to give life.

The question seems to be what is humanity made of? Ezekiel is working here from the idea that the spirit is something different from the flesh. God puts the bodies back together first: the bones and sinews, the muscles and skin … “but there was no breath in them”—no ruah—no spirit. Interestingly, though, that reverses the order from the prophecy: When Ezekiel announces the word of the Lord, he says first: “I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live.” Then the physical restoration comes after that. Why is that? Perhaps it’s because the restoration of the spirit is the more important promise.

The spirit marks this as a story of re-creation. At creation, the spirit is hovering over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2). In Genesis 2:7, “the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground” … but humankind was just this pile of dust until God “breathed into Adam’s nostrils the breath of life; and then the dirt-creature became a living soul.” Physical stuff is not worth much without the spirit that is breathed by God.

Ezekiel’s re-creation story is of course different. It’s the story of the rebirth of a nation. Ezekiel is speaking to exiles and to those who have seen their city destroyed and their civilization seemingly stamped out. But here, God offers to bring them back to life, and even to restore them to their land. Flesh and blood restored to the soil of Judah!

Hm, but wait: “Blood and soil”? … In German, that would be Blut und Boden. Now we are in dangerous territory. Can you hear the echoes? “Blood and soil” was a Nazi slogan.

This is, in a very real sense, a nationalistic text and an ethnocentric text. At least since there has been writing, nationalism has frequently been a powerful force in human cultures, lurking at the door. And still today it rears its head forcefully in the United States and in Europe. Citizens who self-identify as natives look at each other and say “you are my bone and my flesh,” and from there dangerous things happen.

Professor Christopher B Hayes writes, “For that reason, Ezekiel’s emphasis on spirit is important—because the spirit of God is something different from bone and flesh. When the Spirit of God moves, other things happen. Creation happens. And at Pentecost, the disciples “were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:4). Those who were filled with the Spirit did not band together and persecute those who spoke other languages; instead, they were empowered to share the gospel with them.

The things Jesus was sent to do, he sends us to do: “Go and do likewise.” And the agenda Jesus calls us to is a long way from the agendas of our nationalist parties today. It is important to resist these movements for the sake of the public good; that’s only what Jesus would have done. But it is just as important to resist for the sake of the church. So often these movements embrace Christianity as part of a nationalist program, and in doing so, they take the Lord’s name in vain. That way lies death for the church.

Ezekiel 37 makes a call on its hearers as well. It implies that “bone and flesh” or ”blood and soil” is just dead dust. There is no life apart from the God-breathed spirit. That’s why the prophet emphasizes the spirit, and why it is the climax of the passage. But through human history, we forget this again and again and again.

But I fully acknowledge more often than not I feel like dried up bones that a live jumping Spirit-filled prophet. We have been in what most likely feels like a battle to hang on to our community, our relationships, our faith traditions, our structures that made life feel worthwhile. The patterns we had been a part of were disrupted and we are now reduced to the essential framework, the skeleton. We have given, and given, and given of our time, our listening ears, our patience and gifts and finances. We are tired. We are burnt out.

But I know that God has the power to resurrect, to give life. So, how is God bringing new life? How is Christ putting flesh on us to be his hands and feet? How is the Holy Spirit breathing into us? What can we do now with the lessons we have learned when we, the church, left the building? How is the spirit breathing new life into us? How will we continue to be outside this building preaching good news to the crowds?

Because our reading from Acts the Holy Spirit breaks out from the small group of Jesus’ followers to the diversity of the crowd. This crowd which had gathered from all the very difficult to pronounce places around the Mediterranean. Acts scholar Eric Barreto points out that what we witness, is the Holy Spirit validating difference and working through it, not erasing difference and working despite it. The oracle from Joel cited by Peter affirms this vision through its vivid language of “all flesh” to describe the Spirit’s permeation of persons of all genders, ages, and social status.

Calls for unity have been strong in the US lately. So, what does unity means for the church? Does Acts’ famous Pentecost scene call us to imagine a unity that is monolingual and univocal, a church with only one language and one voice? Or, as Barreto suggests, can we strive for unity without erasing difference, but rather affirming it? Is the Spirit found in a church where all members look, think, and act alike, or in a church that works together and takes difference as a starting point for manifesting the Spirit?

The Spirit is not new at Pentecost. The Spirit didn’t start on the day we celebrate today. The “newness” of the Spirit’s coming at Pentecost as making both salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit available to all human flesh. To everyone everywhere. To people “of every nation.” To both men and women. To both old and young. To both slave and free. [A note about slavery: remember that much or most of the Roman world was enslaved; and remember also that there is still a lot of slavery in the world today—the evil of slavery is not gone, Lord have mercy.]

Have you—like me—grown so familiar with this mind-blowing message that you no longer find it mind blowing? Have you grown so accustomed to this good news that it always doesn’t seem good and certainly doesn’t seem urgent?

Wrap your mind around this message: The very Spirit-life that exists between the Father and the Son is now available to you and to everyone! And this Spirit is easy to get. Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and it is yours. You are already claimed as a Child of God, you are already cleansed and made holy, you are already given a commission. Turn yourself and become reoriented to the Way of Jesus. Love God and love your neighbor of any type as your very self, as your most beloved. The Spirit of new life is here and goes before us wherever we go.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing so you may abound in hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.