

## Feel the Burn!

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Crossroads Church recently held its annual direction setting retreat. A number of different groups convened around a variety of topics – many for discussion only, but several would become Work Groups for the upcoming church year. Work groups are the primary organizational vehicle for Crossroads' ministry.

One group convened around the topic of worship. The conversation included a discussion of whether the worship team should continue be a work group, re-forming each year out of the annual retreat, or become a standing committee of the church because of its unique ministry – that of planning our community's Sunday morning worship. It's a valid question and has been discussed before.

There was one statement made in the course of the conversation about worship that is so very relevant to today's subject. The value of re-forming the worship work group each year and of the dialogue around what we do and how we do it is like a "fresh wind blowing through process". That was true of all the conversations that took place at the annual retreat -- and for the church's entire structure of ministry. It is life-giving to have a fresh wind blowing through all that we do as church.

Today is Pentecost. For Christians, this day marks the beginning of the Christian Church, based on a story in the book of Acts when the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples of Jesus, gathered in an upper room after his death. They were huddled around trying to decision on vision and direction, I think, when the Spirit seemed to arrive all at once with lots of noise and tongues of fire. There was a free wind, the breath of the Spirit, and the Church had its identity and its direction. Church is an outgrowth of that gift of the Spirit. This church is an outgrowth of that gift of the Spirit.

The story we're examining today is from the Old Testament, from Ezekiel 37 – the prophet's vision of the valley of dry bones. This might have been an actual battlefield, the sight of ineffective resistance to Babylonian invaders. The bones may have been those of dead Israeli soldiers. They were dry and bleached bones. They were a symbol of utter hopelessness and despair.

In this vision, God doesn't speak to the bones. God speaks to the prophet and the prophet speaks to the bones. This is an important distinction. Ezekiel had to own his responsibility as a partner of God. God chooses us to be involved, but we need to step up and take part. As a result, the bones came together – the foot bone connected to the ankle bone; the ankle bone connected to the leg bone; to the thigh bone, to the hip bone; to the back bone, to the neck bone, to the head bone. "O, hear the word of the Lord."

Muscles and connective tissue grew on those bones and skin covered them. And then the prophet spoke again and the wind blew and the spirit of life animated those lifeless bodies and the dry bones became a large army waiting at God's disposal.

The Spirit of God, symbolized by wind (Hebrew *ruach*), can't be seen or contained. The Spirit is always on the move. The Spirit always brings about new life.

This image of breath, wind, and Spirit is a symbol of vitality. Ezekiel's vision is a story of revitalizing, of new life, of a people born again.

The calling of a new church at Pentecost, as told in the New Testament book of Acts, depicts a group of "dry bones" put back together by hope in the resurrection. They were brought to life by the life of the risen Christ as they realized Christ was not dead. Christ was alive within them and alive in their community. Then, at Pentecost, they became filled with energy and with new life. They were enthused with the very breath of God.

The Bible uses a different word here for "breath/spirit" than is used in the Genesis when God breathes life into Adam. That Spirit of life was the initial life-giving breath to the man God created from the mud. The Spirit is already in us. It's the breath of life from God. We are already alive.

Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones and the Pentecost story of a church finding its life are both stories of new life. They are stories about revitalized people who become inspired. They are filled with the single image of Spirit filling people to accomplish a task. This revitalizing Spirit comes to the faithful, but not at our command. For example, the inspiration of an artist or a writer does not always arise when desired. You can't just wait for it to show up. You have to prepare and then be faithful, even when there seems to be little hope of success.

God inspires the church. God inspires this church. God inspires us to be more fully who we can be. Perhaps two other images will help. How many of you are runners? How about walkers or other athletic types? Aerobics?

When you exert and fatigue sets in, then you persevere, you get what's often called a "second wind". What does it mean? I never got that far running. The secret is don't stop and rest. Otherwise, you have to start all over. When we get that second wind, it lets us keep moving ahead and go the distance.

Are you familiar with the expression "feel the burn"? That's the image of the feeling of exertion when exercise is being effective. When you "feel the burn," you know that your making progress.

The story of Pentecost and of Ezekiel and the dry bones are stories of getting a second wind. They are stories of receiving the Spirit and gaining a second wind. When the Church is being born at Pentecost, it's really the church being born anew. Our church today is being born anew. We are getting our second wind.

There is a new wind blowing through Crossroads Church. It is the breath of the Spirit. Maybe we have gone through a little dry time, a time of some fatigue, but a new breeze is blowing through this community. We're getting a second wind. Do you feel the burn?

There may have been a time of some burn out here, when fatigue begins to set in and our church building muscles start to get tired. It's hard to keep going, but a new breeze is blowing through this community. We're getting a second wind. Do you feel the burn?

There may have been some collisions along the way that have taken our breath away. Some really cherished friends and members have moved to the sidelines or even

left the field. But there are new members and new friends. There's a new wind blowing here. It's a new breath, a second wind. Can you feel the burn?

There may have been some challenging times for us, but there have been good times as well. Remember the recent production of *Joseph*? What about the Guatemala sewing machine project? Think about the summer mission trip of our youth to the Wind River reservation. There have been powerful experiences of worship. Don't forget the profound experiences of many who have been studying and discussing *The Heart of Christianity* by Marcus Borg.

I look at Crossroads Church and I see a church getting its second wind, a church being inspired. Two clear signs of that inspiration are our current capital campaign and our recent direction setting retreat. Participation in the capital campaign events and in the leadership of the campaign has been extraordinarily high. I anticipate success through reaching our financial goal. In truth, however, the campaign is already successful as measured by the enthusiasm, the excitement, and the involvement of our membership. We are already discovering truth about who we are and where we are going on the journey.

The annual direction setting retreat took place a few weeks ago. If you were on it, perhaps you felt, as I did, the fresh breath of the Spirit and the new wind of possibilities blowing through this community. There was enthusiasm. There is inspiration. Yet, excitement is not enough in itself. It is only valuable when it moves us to action.

The capital campaign is moving toward Commitment Sunday in two weeks. This will be a time of financial commitment followed by a focused effort to find a church house.

The annual retreat was filled with conversations about many topics, with several moving toward establishing work groups and direction for the upcoming year. Today is a day of action. During the final song, I invite representatives from each group to move to a spot along wall corresponding to the sign with your group's name. Following the service, I invite each of you to take time to check out opportunities. It's time to sign up and to get involved.

The inspiration I see here was spoken of by the German poet Goethe. You've heard me quote this before.

Unless one is committed, there is a hesitancy; the chance to draw back. ...There is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred.

A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance which no one could have dreamed would come his way.

What you can do, or dream you can, begin it: boldness has  
genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now

“The bones moved and came together, bone to bone. I kept watching. Sinews  
formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. The breath entered  
them and they came alive! They stood up on their feet, a huge army. I’ll breathe my life  
into you and you’ll live. Then I’ll lead you straight back to your land and you’ll realize  
that I am God. I’ve said it and I’ll do it. God’s Decree” (Ezekiel 37, from *The Message*)

So be it. Lead us, O God. You are our life, our breath, and being itself.

Amen.

(From the Crossroads capital campaign prayer)

We affirm our faith in you, O God,  
the one who acts with us  
yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Thank you for bringing us to this moment.

Our hearts are overflowing with gratitude.

As we continue on this pilgrimage together,  
we choose to cooperate

with what your Spirit is already doing. Amen