

Choosing to Live!

Ezekiel 37: 1-14

Today is Pentecost Sunday. The name means fifty and, like most ancient agricultural festivals, it originally centered around the harvest, celebrating fifty days from the bringing of the first fruits of harvest at the beginning of Passover. For the Jews, Pentecost became a time to commemorate Moses' receiving the Torah.

For Christians, this is the day we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit, in a very noisy way, to the original apostles. The Spirit came in a mighty wind and with tongues of fire, and they went out and spoke to the people in Jerusalem with power and authority, and many accepted their teaching about Jesus. Pentecost marks, in many ways, the birthday of the Christian Church.

We're celebrating that birthday in many ways today. The Bible story we'll use, however, is not the one told in the book of Acts about that first Christian Pentecost. It is the very ancient and very Jewish story of another noisy and windy experience of the Spirit.

Ezekiel was a prophet. He was not a prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah, or like Nathan or Samuel. They stood up and spoke to the people, claiming to bring them God's Word. What we have of their words written down was largely the work of their disciples and scribes who captured, or recreated, their teachings.

Ezekiel was an apocalyptic prophet whose prophecies were in written form. Apocalyptic prophecy was always very dramatic and always came with a message about what God would do to save and restore Israel, the chosen people, as a culminating event to creation. In the 37th chapter, Ezekiel wrote his most familiar and most famous vision.

"God grabbed me," one version records Ezekiel saying. "God's Spirit took me up and set me down in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones." Where was this place? The nation of Israel was on a trade route between Egypt and the nations of the Middle East: Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. This was the source of her wealth during the reigns of David and Solomon. This was also the reason she was a prime, and easy, target for military conquest. Many of Israel's sons were killed trying to defend her from many enemies. Many of them died on the plain called Meggido: a wide-open space made for battle. It was on the plain of Meggido that the beloved young king Josiah was killed shortly before the captivity and exile in Babylon. This plain was the sight chosen by later apocalyptic prophets for the great final battle between the forces of good and of evil, the battle called Armageddon.

On the plain of Meggido were strewn the long dead bones, the sun-bleached bones, of generations of Israel's armies. They were a visible reminder that the spirit of the nation of Israel was also long dead, dried up, and beyond hope of revival. The scene Ezekiel describes is one of hopelessness. There was silence all around the bones – silence except for the wind whistling through scrub brush and through the dried up bones. The scene was death, absolute death.

Ezekiel's vision continues. The voice of the Spirit speaks to the prophet: "Son of man [mortal], can these bones live?" Not wanting to say anything to offend the Spirit, Ezekiel offered the diplomatic response: "Master God, only you know that."

With a sudden certainty, like the voice that spoke to Jonah with a command to prophesy to the citizens of Nineveh, the voice commands Ezekiel, "Prophesy over these bones." Tell those dried-up bones, "Listen to the Message of God!" Unlike Jonah, who

ran away because of the voice and its command, Ezekiel did what he was told. “Dry bones,” he instructed, “hear the Message of God!” Listen to this, dried-up old bones: God says, “I’ll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You’ll come alive and you’ll realize that I am God!” You’ll not only realize it, but you jump into action because of it.

Suddenly, the silence of the plain is pierced by a clanking sound. Bone onto bone. The foot bone connecting to the leg bone, to the hipbone, to the backbone, to the head bone. O, hear the word of the Lord. And the bones of Israel stood before Ezekiel, held together with connective tissue and muscle, covered with skin.

The dry bones now have the appearance of life. But there is no life in them. No breath, no spirit animates them. Suddenly, the four winds blowing through the scrub brush become the animating Spirit, as Ezekiel perceives the wind as the Spirit of God. And indeed it is.

The dead army of dry bones lives by the same Spirit in which we live and move and have our being -- in God. The wind is the Spirit and the reconstituted bodies are brought to life.

What did this vision mean? Once again, the Spirit speaks, “Son of man, mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” They are saying of themselves, “Our bones are dried up, our hope is gone, there’s nothing left of us.” Your job, Ezekiel, is to tell your people – make them listen – “God, the master, says: I’ll dig up your graves and bring you out alive – O my people! ...I’ll breathe my life into you and you’ll live. ...I’ve said it and I’ll do it. God’s decree!”

What does this story mean for us? Sometimes our lives lie like those dry bones scattered over the landscape. Life has left them so long ago, the victim of some ancient battle, and now there is nothing left but dry bones. More often our lives are like those reconstructed bodies, standing with the appearance, but not the substance, of life – without the animating spirit.

I think, it is our work to bring together the form of our lives – those bodies that stand lacking only the breath of life. It is our task, and the gift we offer, to take and assemble the skeleton of our lives with connective tissue and empowering muscle. We cover our lives with the skin of appearance, form, and style. We do this work as a community and as individuals in community.

We build ourselves and help build each other, but it is the Spirit that gives us life. God provides the Spirit. The breath of life is God’s gift. We stand and receive it.

This is the season of the year for new beginnings. Today, we acknowledge the new beginning marked by academic graduation. Commencement ceremonies are times of new beginnings. There is a sense in which every Sunday, every service of worship, every time of prayer, is a time of commencement and an opportunity for new beginning.

The message of Ezekiel’s vision is this: *choose life*. I’m not speaking here about the medical ethics of prolonging someone through use of extraordinary medical technology. I’m also not talking about the morality of abortion and of birth control. These are important issues for we, as Christians, to talk about. But the message *choose life* is much more basic, much more foundational.

Think of this sermon as a commencement address. I’m speaking to you about choosing to live your life in a way that is faithful to who you are deep inside. This is about living your life in such a way that your life will make a difference, even a small one, for good in the world.

Let me ask you this: if you had a wish for the world, what would it be? Now,

what will it take for you to start making your wish come true? This congregation of Crossroads Church is sorting that out as we set our goals for the upcoming year. We desire to touch this community with a message of hope. We desire to work for justice and peace in the world. We desire to use our gifts to bring joy and meaning in people's lives and to help our lives grow.

What are your goals for the coming year? What is it that brings you to life -- that invites the Spirit to animate you? There is more to abundant life than security, wealth, achievement, and even contentment. Be sure to do what brings you to life.

In Ezekiel's vision, God promised to restore Israel to its Promised Land. As a congregation, our promised land is the hope and the potential we hold in our hearts. It is our mission and the difference we can make in the world. God is inviting us to get into action.

As individuals, our promised land is the hope we hold in our hearts for ourselves, for our existence, for what our lives can be. How can you and I choose to live in the new creation of God? First, we have to get to the point that we stand before God with some skeleton, some connective tissue, some muscle, and some skin. Then, as the Spirit moves to fill us, we have to breathe in that Spirit and let it animate us, thereby choosing life. Then, by choosing to live, we are compelled to get into action: to create, to learn, and to dance.