

“Great Expectations”

The Day of Pentecost - May 23, 2021 - Ezekiel 37 and Acts 2

Hear the word of the Lord from the prophet Ezekiel, our Old Testament lesson for today:

(Read slowly...) “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...’”

Not exactly what you would expect for this festival day of Pentecost. Not exactly the quick fix to all human problems that we like to think came along with that “power from on high” and those tongues of fire that took up residence on the heads of the disciples, giving them heavenly strength to succeed in life and mission. But Ezekiel’s prophesy is probably closer to our reality today than the fanfare and flourish of the Spirit’s renewed presence on Jesus fans on that day 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. Because Pentecost 2021 feels very different than we expect, and we may be in for a long, green Pentecost season this summer that’s going to be a challenge. Knowing that - and realizing you’re here to serve people who don’t have a lot of joy happening in their lives right now - might just help you adjust your expectations appropriately.

Our church has been open for in-person worship for 10 weeks, and yet we are hardly whole again. Some of our number are unable to attend due to restrictive health or mobility issues, and I’m glad that so many continue to connect with us in virtual worship. Some are so completely comfortable at home these days that they may not come out for a long time. Getting back in the habit takes intention. But others have found themselves deeply affected by Anxiety, Depression, Loneliness, Boredom, or just Feeling Useless and perhaps even a bit Afraid. It’s no wonder. Our entire structure for life has changed - even when we know what we believe; when we know what to do; when we know who we are - it takes energy to re-create the structures and routines that were so much a part of ourselves.

We believe - but we are not sure how to express that belief without a stable church community; we have tasks to perform, but we are not sure how to complete them in the midst of a global pandemic and its aftermath; we know who we are, but seem uncertain how to express that identity when our world is primarily our own family, some close friends and a computer avatar as our personal stand in. It seems that we are standing in a valley - completely surrounded by dry bones - with little or no motivation or strength to even ***begin*** to put our house back together again.

I mean, how can we build without the tools and the resources? Where do we start? Look around you, people of God. See your people. Attend to your neighbor. *It’s not just the folks out there who are dry bones; devoid of the moisture that allows for flesh; awaiting God’s breath of the Holy Spirit.* Where is the anxiety? What disappointment is out there? Who bears the burdens of injustice? Is hopelessness sneaking into your relationships? Is addiction or disease overwhelming whole families? Is despair blanketing entire neighborhoods touched by a suicide? Is our community trapped by our own advantage so that we look away from the poverty, injustice and fear that grips us in the deepest places - places that we might just now have the time and space to be discovering? Again, hear God’s word through Ezekiel:

(read slowly) 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 (God) 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...

What do we expect the church to DO in response to a global pandemic or the existence of evil in the world? What do we expect from each other as we go about our lives bearing *our own burdens* while we take on the burdens of others who also need God and God's people in their lives **to share the weight**? What does God expect of us when we open up our doors for people to Come and See at the same time that God persistently and doggedly calls us **OUT** of this building and **INTO** the world from which we hide...Dear friends, the pandemic did not create our Status Quo, it simply accelerated what was already happening. To paraphrase scholar Walter Brueggemann's comments on the church as the pandemic starting to take hold, "The world you have been preparing for, the world you are used to, is being taken away from you...by the grace of God." Not what we expected.

Pentecost was not what the disciples expected, either. While they were huddled in the room where they had most likely been staying off and on since their last supper with Jesus - the rest of Israel's faithful Jews were gathering in the city for The Festival of Shuh-vo'o'-ote (Shavuot) - marked after a week of weeks - on the 50th day after the first night of Passover. It was a harvest festival in Jesus' time, and celebrated the first fruits that would be brought in from the fields and offered at the Temple in grateful thanksgiving to God's providing. People from all over the ancient world came for the party. But the disciples remained indoors as they obeyed one of Jesus' last words to them, "*Remain in the city (Jerusalem) until you have been clothed with power from on high.*" What did they expect would happen? That they would suddenly be fashioned into an army and drive the Roman occupiers out of their Temple and their land? Would they become miracle workers just as their Rabbi Jesus had been? Would they finally find a way to free their people to walk about without fear and lead godly lives of service to their neighbor? They must have been terrified. But maybe they were excited, too - impatient for what was to come - even without the physical presence of Jesus.

And what did they get? None of the things they had expected; and all of these things at the same time. They received the most precious gift: free communication with the whole world - no language barriers - no fear of being politically incorrect - no barriers to the most effective transmission of love that the world has ever heard. And with the baptism of fire-like tongues on them and among them, their dry bones started to take on sinews and muscles and blood and skin -- and BREATH. They breathed just like a mother giving birth to a child. And through those Holy Spirit breaths, their fears were forgotten in the exhilaration of the experience. It was the replacement of fear with love in human history - and the assurance that they were in the exact right place at the exact right time. They breathed out the lives they had known and embraced what God had had in mind all along.

It was no longer about their power or Rome's control or the religious authority's adherence to the Law. It was now about sacrificial love; and tending to each other's needs,

and being a comforting community that welcomes everyone, and a God that listens and loves and gives that breath of new life every moment of every day. It was the dawn of the vision of the Kingdom of God - and it was, and is - completely different.

We cannot plan the future; for the future is when God gets what God wants. **Faith** is a choice we make each day. It is the choice to stay in our relationship with the sacred for one more day...Each day there are billions of us who wake up wanting to go on living, to go on believing in the traditions we have held holy, to go on trying in our own way to embody a spiritual mixture of hope and love. To ourselves we may seem too small to be of much notice. But when you count us in our true numbers, suddenly the day of healing liberation may not be as far off as we think. So, keep the faith, yes, and see how many others there are doing the same thing right beside you.

On this Festival of the Day of Pentecost - when we have counted a week of weeks and come to a fulfillment of the Resurrection celebration 50 days ago - we get what the disciples got. We get flesh on the dry bones left over from over a year of global pandemic. We get the freedom of overcoming our fear. We get the presence of God in our very **bodies**, and the Dawn of Creation with our every **breath**. We get to choose our faith anew every day and we have the incredible privilege of being together as people of God at Advent - both in this room and virtually - as we receive the gracious power of God from on high.

Pentecost version 2021 - not what you expected? Well, as the Jesus portrayed in the series *The Chosen* says to Simon Peter (who is trying desperately to keep Jesus from inviting Matthew to become one of the 12, inferring that his own grace-filled calling was "different" from accepting this Tax Collector...) Jesus' timeless reply? "*Get used to different.*" It's what the Spirit says to us with every breath. *Get used to different. **Expect different.*** And remember what my seminary professor Marty Stortz once proclaimed, "Resurrection does not give us our old, comfortable shoes back. It gives us **new feet.**" Amen.

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Resources: *ELCA Faith Lens* for 5/23/21; Bishop Steven Charleston, *Facebook* 4/29/21; Bishop William Willimon (multiple sessions) 2021 Festival of Homiletics; Rev. Dr. Martha Ellen Stortz, "*Clothed with Power from on High*" sermon for the final quote;

