

05/24/2015 -- Pentecost

“You Shall Live” - Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15

In our reading today, the Lord sets Ezekiel down in the middle of a valley full of bones. They are everywhere and very dry. God asks Ezekiel, “*Mortal, can these bones live?*” Ezekiel answers, saying, “*O Lord God, you know.*” Or, really, “*I have no idea. This is something you do and have done, not me.*”

A couple weeks ago, the Pew Religious Trust, which is a large information gathering group, released their newest study - “*America’s Changing Religious Landscape*”. Within a day of the study hitting the news sites, people who care about these things already had their analysis up. The mainline Christians - which includes us - were horrified to learn what they already suspected was true: their numbers are dropping rapidly. Actually, everyone’s numbers are falling. In the space of 7 years, the number of people who identify as Christian fell from 78% of the population in America to 70%. I just heard on Thursday that the United Church of Christ, the largest Congregationalist body in the world, since 1960 has lost over half its membership - from 2.1 million to about 900,000 today. Of those who grew up Christian, one in five now no longer identify with the faith. The number of agnostics, atheists and people who identify with nothing at all has more than doubled in the past 7 years.

The numbers go on and on like this. The one bright spot is if you are an evangelical - they have held their own over the past 7 years, the last time the study was done. The numbers show that it does not matter if you are rich or poor, what color your skin is, whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, male or female, young or old. At every level, people are jumping off the Christian ship. Or, maybe it is not quite as extreme as that. I mean, 70% of the American population still considers themselves Christian and at least somewhat religious. That is a lot of people.

But judging by some of the articles I have read about this, most Christian denominations and writers are like Ezekiel. They are looking over a field of dry bones. In other words, the church as a whole, in America and in Europe as well (where the numbers are far more extreme), is a brittle, dry husk of its former self. Some see this as a horrible outcome, as a massive failure of churches everywhere. Some see it as the collapse of Western Civilization as we know it. Some use the numbers to confirm, according to their interpretation, that we are morally bankrupt and this is the sign that God has lifted his hand from this once great nation and has fed us to the wolves of liberalism and political correctness.

Some of you in this church have voiced similar concerns about the dropping attendance, the lack of young people, the slow retreat of people from any church life at all. It can be a scary thing. For some of you, this very space is like a valley of dry bones sometimes. I get it. Change is hard.

Personally, a very large part of me welcomes the numbers from the Pew Religious Trust. Those numbers tell me that now, thank God, the virulent, violent and judgmental link between politics and faith is being broken. The numbers suggest to me that we are bearing witness to the collapse of the empire which seeks to define how I think and how I behave for the sake of the empire at the expense of my faith, all the while cloaking itself in the language of faith to further its own ends. Now, we can begin the true work of faith, which is defining for ourselves who we are in relationship with God and Jesus Christ.

Notice, though, that the relationship between the dry bones and the Prophet of God, Ezekiel, is entirely passive. Notice that the Holy Spirit goes where it will and the disciples in that locked room in Jerusalem are simply passive recipients of the Holy Spirit. God has already decided the bones shall live. The disciples have already been chosen; they do not choose to receive the Holy Spirit. They and the dry bones are *given* new life. Some have prepared themselves, some have been prepared, some have just joined the group, some have been laying in wait for years. The Holy Spirit decides when the Holy Spirit will descend. We are dependent on God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit for our spiritual life.

Psalm 104, one of my favorite Psalms, puts it this way:

*Bless the Lord, O my soul!
O Lord my God, you are very great!
You are clothed with splendor and majesty, (Psalm 104:1)
He set the earth on its foundations,
so that it should never be moved.
You covered it with the deep as with a garment;
the waters stood above the mountains. (Psalm 104:5-6)
You make springs gush forth in the valleys;
they flow between the hills; (Psalm 104:10)
You cause the grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for man to cultivate,
that he may bring forth food from the earth (Psalm 104:14)
These all look to you,
to give them their food in due season.
When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
When you hide your face, they are dismayed;
when you take away their breath, they die
and return to their dust.
When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
(Psalm 104:27-30)*

Do you hear the *absolute dependence* upon God in these verses? THIS is our relationship with God and with Christ. This was the relationship between the dry bones and God, between Ezekiel and God. This was the relationship between the disciples and the Holy Spirit. And it is ours as well. We are *receivers of the blessings of God*.

Our work is in our response to what we have received from God. The secret to Pentecost is not “*What can I do to receive the Holy Spirit?*”, but instead, “*How do I respond to what the Lord has already given me; how do I respond to the Spirit that has already come upon me?*” Ezekiel responds with the voice of prophecy. **Prophecy** is the act of responding to God by speaking God’s word into a particular situation so that the situation is utterly transformed now and into the future. Prophecy is a response to what God is already doing. In this case, God is breathing through Ezekiel to give the passive and inactive bones new life. Prophecy, in this regard, is at once enacting new things by God and at the same time an act of thanksgiving and gratitude to God for all those things upon which we depend.

Remember who sends the Holy Spirit: Jesus authorizes the sending of the Holy Spirit to the disciples. He does this because “*He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.*” (John 16:14-15) This is something we receive. The flames of Pentecost, the new life of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit are gifts we receive from God, in the same way the dry bones in the valley receive the breath of God.

It does not really matter whether the bones, the disciples, you or I are open to God’s breath, the Spirit’s new life, or not. The important part of the story is that the prophet has been called by God to breath the Spirit of God upon them, that Jesus has sent the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*” (John 3:8) This is the way it is with God’s Spirit and it is how the Spirit is with us.

In the midst of the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel speaks the prophecy of God upon the long dead “*and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude*” (Ez 37:10). They are given new life, like a congregation renewed, or a chosen people resurrected.

Now, we as a church can panic about the future of the faith. These numbers are far, far more threatening in Maine, where fewer people go to church and declare any affiliation to anything than any other state in the nation, except for our neighbor Vermont. We can worry about the state of the country with so many people leaving the church. We can give into the fear and the sense of despair and the constant sense of crisis that our 24 hour news cycle wants us to participate in so we will keep watching, which really means so we can buy from their advertisers.

Or, we can be Prophets of Gratitude for what we have received from the Lord. Because finally, that is what the disciples are at Pentecost - prophets of the new things God is doing, new things which they have already received. They are disciples of the gifts

of God. They are responding to the new life Christ has given them by way of the Holy Spirit. Because God has acted out of love through Christ, the disciples act out of thanksgiving for the gift of the Holy Spirit - a gift unasked for, undeserved.

Let me take advantage of my position as pastor and speak prophetically for a moment. I stand before you today and prophesy in the name of the Lord that you are where you need to be as a gathered people covenanted under God. You are living in exactly the right place for the power and breath of the Holy Spirit to fall upon those who would receive the new life of the living Christ. You are in the right time in history for the Lord to *make you live*, as a church and as an individual. You are a Prophet of Gratitude. That is my prophetic statement to you.

In the light of Pentecost, the dry bones have already been given life. In the light of the Holy Spirit, you have already been made alive. God has already said to us, through our teacher and Lord, Jesus Christ, "*You shall live.*" Personally, I would rather see what the future brings because I am completely dependent on the Holy Spirit who is guiding us into all truth, than to give into the fear, despair and trouble that the world wishes for me to see and expect. We are completely dependent upon God and the gifts of God - that is what Pentecost is all about finally. And that is a place of constant gratitude and thanksgiving, because it is born out of love. John says, "*There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us*". (1 John 4:18-19) This is true, regardless of what the numbers are, regardless of how many people declare themselves followers of Christ, regardless of the newest study. Let us live in the truth and be enlightened by it, by the power and fire of the Holy Spirit.

*When you send forth your Spirit, they are created,
and you renew the face of the ground.
May the glory of the Lord endure forever;
may the Lord rejoice in his works,
who looks on the earth and it trembles,
who touches the mountains and they smoke!
I will sing to the Lord as long as I live;
I will sing praise to my God while I have being. (Psalm 104:30-33)*

Amen.