

Can These Bones Live?

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Acts 2:1-21

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Georgetown Presbyterian Church
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Pentecost

The famous Renaissance scholar Erasmus once told a classic story in order to emphasize how important it is that we take up the torch of Christ's ministry with great commitment. Erasmus told how Jesus returned to heaven after His time on earth. The angels gathered around Jesus to learn what happened during his days on earth. Jesus told them of the miracles, his teachings, his death on the cross, and his resurrection.

When Jesus finished recounting all this, Michael the Archangel asked him, "But what happens now?"

Jesus answered, "I have left behind eleven faithful disciples and a handful of men and women who have faithfully followed me. They will declare my message and express my love. These faithful people will build my church."

"But," protested Michael, "What if these people fail? What then is your other plan?"

And Jesus answered, "I have no other plan."

I understand the point that Erasmus was trying to make with his story. He is telling us that Jesus has placed the responsibility of continuing his ministry in the hands of ordinary people like you and me, and that the success of the church in proclaiming the gospel depends largely on the commitment we make. But I don't fully agree with Erasmus' final conclusion, namely, that Jesus had no other plan in mind. Because you see, Jesus did have more in mind than simply allowing 11 faithful disciples and a few other believers to carry out the great commission. Jesus knew that the people of God would not be able to do the work without help. Jesus knew that the Holy Spirit would come and fill and empower all of God's people to carry out all of God's work.

Today is Pentecost. It is the day we remember the giving of the Holy Spirit. And so both of our scripture lessons focus on the power of God's Holy Spirit to breathe life into the people of God, so that we can carry out the work that God calls us to do.

The first lesson is the more familiar Pentecost text. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem, when all of a sudden a wind blows through the building where they are gathered, and tongues of flame rest on their shoulders. The disciples spontaneously begin proclaiming God's deeds of power, and everyone who witnesses this event hears the disciples speaking in their own native languages. It is a story of God sending his Spirit to empower God's people to proclaim the gospel in boldness and in truth. It is a story of God opening the door for the gospel to spread to all nations, as Jesus had commissioned his disciples to do. It is a story that reminds us that we are not left to our own abilities in carrying out the work God has called us to do; God has sent us his Holy Spirit to equip us and empower us and guide us and encourage us.

But it is the second text upon which I want to reflect this morning. The text from Ezekiel is not a description of Pentecost per se, but it is a description of the power of the Holy Spirit to breathe life into God's people.

Ezekiel is taken in a vision to a valley. The valley is full of sun-bleached dry bones. It is not the valley of the shadow of death, but the valley of death itself. The valley is completely void of life. God asks Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel can't imagine the possibility that the bones could come to life. Nevertheless, Ezekiel recognizes that as long as God is involved nothing is impossible, so he answers, "O Lord God, you know."

God then instructs Ezekiel to preach God's word to the bones. And as Ezekiel does so, the bones begin to rattle and come together. Then God instructs Ezekiel to preach to the wind and command the wind to enter into the bones, that they may come to life. Again Ezekiel does what God says, and the multitude comes to life.

Then God tells Ezekiel that what he has just witnessed is a metaphor for Israel, God's people. Israel had witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple. The people had been taken away into exile in Babylon. Their God had been mocked. Their identity had been stripped from them. Even though the Babylonians told the Israelites they could worship God, they refused to do so because worship was too painful—it would only remind them that their God had been defeated and could not deliver them. The people of Israel lamented in their exile, "Our bones have dried up, and our hope is lost. We are cut off."¹ Israel, as a nation, was dead.

Or so they thought.

For God takes the dead, dried up bones and he breathes life into them. It is a promise that there is hope, that God has not abandoned his people, even in exile. These bones will live!

The metaphor for Israel could also apply to the church today. It's not that the church has been taken away into exile. But the church is alienated by a hostile world. The church is mocked by those who say faith is a sign of weakness. The church has lost its voice because we have tried to make ourselves sound more and more like the world around us. The Christian church in America has, in many regards, become irrelevant and impotent in our proclamation of the gospel. Within the Presbyterian Church we must ask the question, "Can these bones live?" After thirty years of declining membership in our denomination, internal disputes and power struggles, we wonder if these bones can live.

And the answer that God provides us through the vision of Ezekiel is a resounding "Yes". Yes, the Christian church can once again provide a viable and relevant voice in our society! Yes, the people of God can once again provide an alternative to the selfish and materialistic solutions that the world! Yes, the people of God can be a beacon of hope in a cold, dark world!

But it will take at least two things—two things made clear through Ezekiel's vision.

The first is the faithful proclamation of the word of God. "Prophesy to the bones," says God. "Preach my word to them." It is when the word of God is faithfully and obediently preached that the bones begin to move and show signs of life. There is a lesson in this for the church: if we are going to be the people of God who shine the light of God's love and justice and mercy into the world, then we must speak God's word. For God's word is the source of our hope. And God's word is the light that guides people who have lost their way. And God's word is the promise of salvation to a broken and fallen world. As a church we must speak God's word to the world.

The second thing that it will take to make the Christian church relevant once again is the movement of the Holy Spirit in our midst. It is when God breathes his Spirit into his people that God's people truly come to life. It was only after Ezekiel spoke to the wind, and the breath of the Spirit came upon the bones, that the bones came to life. It was only after the Holy Spirit blew its way into the room where the disciples had gathered, that the church was born and empowered to fulfill the great commission to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth.

¹ Ezekiel 37:11

It takes the Spirit of God to bring life and power to God's people. Without the Spirit of God, we are unable to do anything on our own. That's the core of the Pentecost message I want to emphasize today—that it is only by the power of God at work in us through the Holy Spirit that any of us is able to be faithful to God's call.

Georgetown Presbyterian Church is a far cry from a heap of dry bones. We have a long and storied history of relevance in our community and our world. But we dare not rest on our past. Neither do we dare to claim credit by ourselves. For without a commitment to the Word of God, and without the work and guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, this church would be little more than a collection of bricks and mortar. It is the faithful proclamation of God's word and the anointing power of the Holy Spirit that makes whatever we do in the name of our Lord effective.

Daniel Iverson was a young Presbyterian minister in Miami, Florida. He was called to a church that was struggling to survive. After a couple of years of ministry, the church still had not grown. As Pentecost approached that year, Iverson wondered how he could get across to his congregation the reality of the transforming power of God's Spirit. He knew that though the Spirit resided in every believer's heart, the Spirit didn't rule in every believer's heart.

During his reflection, words came to mind for Iverson, words that he used to compose a song. He taught the song to his congregation, and he explained to them that for the Spirit to be in control, the Spirit had to be more than just a resident in our hearts. The Spirit must rule our hearts. The Spirit must melt our hearts. And the Spirit must also mold our hearts into the image of Christ.

And then Iverson quoted Dwight L. Moody. Someone had asked Moody why he prayed every day to be filled with the Spirit. And Dwight L. Moody said, "Every day I pray to be filled with the Spirit, because every day I leak." And Iverson said, "I leak too, and I need to be filled."

From that point on, the congregation in Miami sang the song Iverson wrote every Sunday for over 25 years. The song became a prayer they sang from the depths of their heart. It was a cry, a yearning for the Spirit of God to fill them anew. First Presbyterian Church in Miami grew to be the largest Presbyterian church in the state, as the people opened themselves to the Holy Spirit to transform them and to empower them.

The song they sang? You know it well:
 Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
 Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.
 Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.
 Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.²

Can these bones live?
 You know, O Lord.
 Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on us. Amen.

² The story of Daniel Iverson is told in numerous places. This story was taken from a sermon by Rev. Dr. Louis Zbinden, "I Believe in the Holy Ghost," given at First Presbyterian Church in San Antonio, Texas, March 3, 2002.