

THE DAY OF PENTECOST May 31, 2009 A

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Acts of the Apostles 2:1-21
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Pentecost traditionally has been called the birthday of the church. I suspect this is due, to a great extent, to the account in today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles. The disciples of Jesus weren't prepared for his death and even though they had experienced their Risen Lord, their hopes and dreams had been shattered and they went through a stretch of time trying to figure out what to do next. Jesus promised them that he would not leave them orphans, that he would send them another Advocate (or helper) who would lead and guide them. But it hadn't happened yet, at least not until the fiftieth day after Passover, which today's account from the Acts of the Apostles describes in a most amazing way. Jesus had told them not to leave Jerusalem but to wait (Acts 1:4) for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

I've often thought of Pentecost as a CPR experience through which God breathed new life and spirit into the minds, hearts and wills of a struggling community of disciples. Pentecost is not just about how God's Spirit breathed new life into individuals, but rather how God's Spirit brought new life to a community searching for its sense of identity and purpose. It's why we might want to pay closer attention to the story of Ezekiel this morning, especially in these days of increased hardships and struggles due to the present recession in which we find ourselves, when uncertainty related to unemployment, potential loss of home and other challenges are creating a climate of fear and anxiety for so many people.

Ezekiel grew up in Jerusalem in a family whose social life revolved around the temple. His father and grandfather were priests. And Ezekiel was planning to follow in their footsteps. He may have just about been through all the necessary training necessary to graduate and begin his service to God in the temple when a foreign army invaded and conquered the country. Solomon's palace was destroyed. So was the temple. Most of Ezekiel's family and friends were probably killed. And those who weren't, like Ezekiel, were taken captive and let to Babylon. I suspect Ezekiel felt as if his life had come to an end. Everything he hoped and dreamed and expected from life was now gone. His family: gone. The temple: gone. His career: gone. And he himself was a prisoner of war. In the darkness of this situation while living in Babylon, Ezekiel discovers that his true calling was not to be a priest, as he had expected, but that his true calling, slowly unfolding, was to be a prophet.

This is where we meet him in today's first lesson. The Spirit of the Lord grabs hold of him. It's what happens to real prophets. God's Spirit gets into their hearts and minds and wills, moving them to act in God's name. Ezekiel has a vision – a dream which is very real. He is taken to a valley filled with dry bones where God asks him if these dry bones can come back to life. Ezekiel thinks long and hard and answers wisely, "Lord, you know the answer to this one." And then God tells him to start preaching to the bones. And God even tells him what to say.

Can you imagine? Can you imagine someone who dreamed all his life that he would preach in a place like the Washington National Cathedral finding himself, instead, in a foreign land and being told to prophesy to dead bones at a mass grave, in a land where people have lost hope in their future, their possibilities for new life. But it's what God expected of Ezekiel. And it took time for him to come to grips with what it was that God wanted him to do. Some scripture scholars think that it was in the 5th or 6th year of the Babylonian Captivity that Ezekiel had this vision. And that with it came the understanding that, though his life wasn't going to work out the way he expected, nevertheless, his life was going to work out in ways which God intended for him. And though it seemed as if the lives of his fellow men and women in exile had been shattered and destroyed, the vision of 'dem dry bones' brought hope that God was going to breathe new life in them. Ezekiel was surprised by God's gracious presence in a seemingly hopeless situation.

So with this background, the image of Ezekiel prophesying in a valley full of dry human bones, telling the bones that the Lord will breathe new life in them, and witnessing the rattling of the bones coming together, and flesh appearing on the bones as people came to life, was a powerful message of hope for a future not of their making, but of God's. It was the beginning of God breathing new life into the community of Israel.

The story of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is, indeed, a CPR story, a story of God performing artificial resuscitation on a group of fearful and anxious disciples who, in the words of Barbara Brown Taylor in her book, Home By Another Way, "*had sucked in God's own breath and they had been transformed by it. The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again – not in one body this time but in a body of believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift*" (p. 144).

It's a profound and insightful statement, one worth repeating to grasp its significance for us as members of the church: "*The Holy Spirit had entered into them the same way it had entered into Mary, the mother of Jesus, and for the same reason. It was time for God to be born again – not in one body this time but in a body of*

believers who would receive the breath of life from their Lord and pass it on, using their own bodies to distribute the gift."

Wow! That's us, the church – and the Advocate Jesus promised, the Spirit which breathed new life into the disciples on that Day of Pentecost so long ago, continues to breath upon us today.

The Spirit breathes anew on us when we take time to repair broken relationships, when we offer forgiveness and let old wounds heal, when we work together to strengthen the bonds of community which unite us as sisters and brothers in the Spirit of our Risen Lord.

The Spirit breathes anew on us when we move beyond the comfortable circles in which we find ourselves, welcoming people who are different than us into our parish family, when we take the time to explore new possibilities of what we may yet be and become as daughters and sons of a God who loves us deeply.

The Spirit breathes anew upon us when we're willing to take a risk for the sake of the Good News of Jesus, trusting God to lead and guide us, especially when we might be tempted to do nothing – or even worse, let negative voices discourage us from following the path to which the Spirit calls us.

And the Spirit is breathing new life upon us as a parish family. Next Sunday, the strategic planning committee, the clergy, the vestry, the office staff, the stewardship ministry team and members of the council of chairs (the organization leaders of the various church committees) will be meeting for four hours in a strategic planning conclave. It's been a work in progress for quite some time and will continue through the summer....

The gift of the Spirit did not cease with Pentecost, as we know. The Spirit which breathed new life into the disciples on that Day of Pentecost breathes anew upon the church in every generation, including our own. Just as it took the disciples quite some time to grasp the significance of what it means to receive the breath of life from their Lord to pass on to others, so too, for us as a church today. It takes time to grasp and appreciate the mysterious workings of the Holy Spirit within and among us.

I pray this Pentecost Sunday that we experience anew the breath of God's Spirit – and the wisdom and grace to trust in the Spirit's power to lead and guide us.

Amen.