

Sermon: Pentecost

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May 24, 2015

Year B
Ezekiel 37:1-14
Psalm 104: 25-35,37
Acts 2:1-21
John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Ezekiel's vision... is a gift to an exiled people... these are the people who asked how they could sing the Lord's song in a foreign land... these are the people who have lost their footing... these are people who have lost hope...

But it's important to notice... that in today's reading... in the conversation between God and Ezekiel... God asks questions that only God can answer... but God engages Ezekiel... God needs him to take an active role... and God folds him into the process... and it's not Ezekiel asking God whether these bones can live... but the other way around... and God tells him... that breath will enter the bones first... but breath is actually the last thing to enter them... Spirit... is the last thing to enter them...

I think many of us know what it is to lose hope... when we wait in unknowing... afraid that things will not get better... or will turn out worse... I know I do... to feel the death that comes when we seem to be painted into a corner... when there seems to be no way out... no options left... when we may wonder why God has abandoned us... like the exiles did... but it's been my experience that this is almost always the period of time before the Spirit enters... before what needs to be revealed is revealed... before we are ready to hear the things... that before we could not bear...

And this movement... from the confinement and slavery of death... to the promised life of freedom... is an ongoing process... that probably never ends... and even *that* idea... that it never ends... is something we may not be ready to bear...

God speaks through one person to an entire nation... and says to Israel: *I will put my spirit within you... and you shall live...* and we believe that God speaks through smaller groups... like church leadership and committees... we believe that God speaks through the elections of Councils and Vestries... and in pastoral calls...

The United Church of Christ is known for saying that: *God is still speaking...* one of the messages on our outdoor sign is: *Don't put a period where God puts a comma...* and if that's true... and I believe it is... then what God said to Israel... God is also saying to us... so one thing we need to ask ourselves is whether we hear God... or whether we hear ourselves... one thing we need to ask ourselves is whether we can let go of our own agendas... and can sit in silence long enough... even when it becomes deafeningly uncomfortable... to hear what God is saying...

In today's Gospel... Jesus is speaking... he reminds the disciples that he didn't say these things to them from the beginning... because he was with them... but now he's going away... and he needs to go... because if he doesn't... the Advocate won't come...

On Pentecost Sunday... we're accustomed to thinking about the *Paraclete*... the Advocate... as the Holy Spirit... but *Paraclete* can also be translated as Helper... Theologian Raymond Brown wrote: The Johannine portrait of the *Paraclete* cannot be simply equated with the general New Testament picture of the Spirit—the *Paraclete* is the Spirit under a particular aspect... it's the Spirit of Truth...

And commentator Judith McDaniel wrote that it's an oversimplification to equate the Spirit of Truth with the Holy Spirit. The *Paraclete* is the presence of Jesus when Jesus is absent... oh yes... had we been there... we might have argued that Jesus' absence would be no advantage at all... but Jesus is assuring us that he will indeed remain alive not just in the gathered community... but the *Paraclete* will be Jesus' presence within the individual Christian...

Cyril of Alexandria... wrote about this in his commentary on John's Gospel... he said:
After Christ had completed his mission on earth... it still remained necessary for us to become sharers in the divine nature of the Word. We had to give up our own life and be so transformed that we would begin to live an entirely new kind of life that would be pleasing to God. This was something we could do only by sharing in the Holy Spirit...

As long as Christ was with them in the flesh... it must have seemed to believers that they possessed every blessing in him... but when it came time for him to ascend to the Father... it was necessary for him to be united through his Spirit... to those who trusted him... and to swell in our hearts through faith... only by his own presence within us in this way... could he give us the confidence too... to cry out Abba... and make it easier to grow in holiness... and fortify us against all assaults that might come our way... this allows us to live a completely new kind of life...

A few of us went yesterday... to see that movie Tomorrowland... it's an action-packed story... and because of something that's happened in the future... the main character... dreamer Frank Walker... has lost hope... he's withdrawn into his home... has made himself hard to find... has hidden from the world... but a young girl... Casey Newton... whose dad works for NASA and who sees possibilities and has virulently contagious hope... infects Frank... and with the help of another young girl... they find the courage and power to change the future... and live a new kind of life too...

We still need that courage and that hope... the world seems crazier than it's ever been... and there are people... too many people... who suffer because of the mistakes... the sins... of others... they are the collateral damage of the reality we've created... and there certainly are many things we cannot control... but we do have the power to influence them...

The Israelites did not have the same sense of individuality that we do... they prospered or failed as a people... and there were no doubt a number of righteous individuals

among the people of Israel... before... during... and after the exile... who suffered the same losses as everyone else... we need to remember that Ezekiel was talking about corporate responsibility... he was looking more at what happens when a people lose focus...

In our time... we need to ask how our beliefs and actions... as a people... affect the world... we need to take responsibility and discern if we are fulfilling the desires of a life-giving God... or if we are contributing to the piles of dry bones...

God is still in control... and always will be... God is still speaking... and God continues to bring life out of death... but God needs our ears to hear and our hearts to listen... and God needs our mouths to ask the questions that need to be asked... not for our sake... but for the sake of God's own holy name... so that the nations will know God's holiness... it may be God's work... but it's in our hands...

The Rev. Paula Jackson wrote: on the Day of Pentecost... the Holy Spirit circumvents political schemes that keep people divided... suddenly... all of them are talking with each other directly... hearing for themselves, and becoming one body... those whose interests are served by keeping people apart try to undermine this unity... *they are filled with new wine*... they say... but the Body is claiming the Resurrection... a valley of dry bones is reassembled and integrated into a people... raised from isolation and alienation... to a life of community and good in this world.... they will not postpone their hope until some hypothetical world after they die...

Come... Holy Spirit... come now... and fill us with all Truth...

Mike+