

Need for a New Pentecost
Acts 2:1-21
May 23, 2021

What a strange picture this is from this 6th century prophet: dead bones in a dry valley! He lived in Babylon with all those who had been carted off from Jerusalem in 586 BC. One of Ezekiel's most famous visions is that of the Valley of the Dry Bones. He is famous for these sorts of vivid pictures. Ezekiel was transported to a valley filled with dry human bones. He was told to instruct the bones to join together and to be covered with sinews, flesh and skin. This was followed by an instruction to the souls to enter the bodies and revive them. What message is the prophet giving to the exiles in Babylon?

God explains to Ezekiel that the dry bones represent the whole house of Israel. Their complaint, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are clean cut off," gives further clue to their identity and concerns. These are not the ones who were slain but those who have survived in exile. Their certainty about God's presence is gone because absence from the Jerusalem Temple closes off any possibility of seeking God. For the exiles, being cut off from God means they are as good as dead.

If the dry bones represent the living exiles, then, it turns out that the entire vision is concerned, not with the reality of death, but with despair. To this hopelessness Ezekiel offers a startlingly simple metaphor of divine presence, the ready availability of breath. In just fourteen verses, the word ***ruach*** occurs nine times, and while it is variously translated as ***breath, and wind*** and ***God as Spirit***. Bottom line, this is God's life force.

Hundreds of years later this same life force will be experienced by a group of disciples gathered and waiting for the promised Holy Spirit. The effect of God's Spirit was similar to the dry bones being made alive by God's breath and wind. But this time it came on living men and women as a rush of a violent wind. This is no gentle inbreaking. The spirit comes suddenly, even violently upon the gathered. Fiery tongues seem to appear and settle on each of them. Then the gathered begin to speak in "other tongues" as enabled by the spirit. It

was so extraordinary that the sound of the voices carried on the wind drew the Jews in the city to find out what this was.

This **ruach of God**, this wind of Pentecost, has a long history. It connects to the account in Genesis where: **a wind from God swept over the face of the waters**. And in the time of Noah we learn that God, **made a wind blow over the over the earth** which brought the raging seas down. It was the same **ruach** (east wind) that blew all night and separated the waters of the sea, allowing Israel to cross to safety. And it was this same spirit (wind) that reminded Elijah that God's fearsome power is, sometimes, best heard through a still, small voice. It was this life-force of Pentecost that connects to the smoking fire pot and flaming torch that sealed the covenant with Abram, and the burning bush at the call of Moses, and the pillar of fire that guided the Israelites through the wilderness.

This Spirit (wind) that filled the space where the followers met is this same Spirit that has been active throughout Scripture. But this event changed everything forever! It birthed a movement that we are part of today. It changed them forever! How about you? Has God's Spirit opened up you and me to a life of faith and service?

We all have experiences that change how we view the world. I remember the first time I bumped into an Apple Store; we were wandering around a mall on a rainy day in Boca Raton Florida when I walked into this bright, futuristic looking store, with its seductive rows of Mac computers and laptops and iPods. I said to myself, "I've got to experience one of those one day." People go to Apple stores to buy the experience of the future.

The Pentecost festival (or **Shavuot** as it was called) dates back in the history of ancient Israel. It was thought to commemorate Moses' receiving the Law on Sinai, which occurred fifty days after Passover. This is reason so many pilgrims are in Jerusalem from regions far and wide; they are there to celebrate the festival of Pentecost. But what they heard that day must have been truly surprising.

But even more so for the followers of Jesus because they not only heard and felt the wind of God, but they experienced it personally. From cowering, fearful followers hiding away from authorities, they

became fearless, bold preachers of the new faith of Jesus. The experience of the risen Christ had rocked their world. The reception of the Holy Spirit energized them to rock the world around them. They, like us today, meet God in Jesus and experience this life-giving Spirit in conversion and new birth.

Think about how radical this event was in the life of these early followers. If it hadn't happened life would have returned to normal for them and life would have been a whole lot less complicated and challenging. They could have gone back to their old careers as fishermen. You can almost hear James and John explaining: **sure, it was a wild and crazy three-year-ride, and that Jesus sure was a heck of a guy, but maybe we needed to get that out of our system before we could settle down and take on Dad's business.**

Once the Spirit comes, however, that return to normalcy is no longer an option. They will now be propelled throughout the ancient world to herald the unlikely message that God has redeemed the world through an itinerant preacher from the backwaters of Palestine. Notice that the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost doesn't solve the problems of those gathered in that upper room; it creates them. Life will become very different for them.

The devout Jews drawn to find out what this noise and upheaval was all about were amazed. Luke tells us: **And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"**

This is not the joy of a child seeing a magic trick. These have gathered because they also heard the violent wind. Their sentiment is closer to bewilderment; they are flummoxed by all of the signs and portents. Some, of course, mock the happenings as a scene caused by people drunk on new wine. Luke uses their question "What does this mean" to launch into Peter's speech.

Peter tells them that this experience they have witnessed is nothing new in one sense. He could have pointed them back to Ezekiel. But

he simply points them to Joel. This is what that prophet predicted. He says: **In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (Acts 2:17)** If we continue the reading in Acts, we discover that Peter preaches that Jesus is indeed the Lord! And they need to bow the knee to him. We are told that this message cut them to the heart and many became Christians; indeed, we are told over 3000 did!

My initial encounter with the Pentecost experience was perhaps not fire and wind, but it was dramatic, life-changing and mysterious. Through the same gospel that had moved these followers to believe I too was brought to faith. I didn't just find the message interesting as if it sounded like a great idea. Rather, it was primarily an experience of the heart that changed me, one that has stayed with me for sixty-one years. That Spirit still moves my heart as it did then.

For too long we Presbyterians have lived on the periphery of this vital experience of the Spirit. We pride ourselves on our commitment to the content of the faith and to our various theological and liturgical traditions. We pride ourselves on intellectual grasp of the faith. Don't get me wrong, our clarity about and commitment to the content of the faith is commendable. But it can never be a substitute for the heart changing experience of the Spirit.

When I have talked to people raised in our Reformed tradition but no longer active, they talk about the boredom they felt. Tradition can too easily become a barrier to the Spirit's work of conversion. I can hear us say, yes, the Holy Spirit experience is fine for those excitable Pentecostalists, among others, but it is not appropriate for us good Scots. We like emotion kept at arm's length from our faith. Should it surprise us then that our congregations are growing older and youth are rarely seen in worship? Surely if the experience of the Spirit of Pentecost is played down or even ignored in our church's liturgy, preaching and teaching, then dry bones may be the result. These bones are crying out for a fresh infusion of the Spirit, don't you think?

Amen