“Burning Questions, Blowing Spirit”

An Adaptation of Ezekiel 37:1-14

and Acts 2: 1-20

Rev. Jody Andrade, Rev. Jennie Sankey

and Rev. Katie Day

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The Rev. Jody Andrade:

Like every encounter with scripture I wonder—who are we in this story? I hear three possibilities—the Lord, those whom the Lord instructs to prophesy, and the recipient of that prophesy—the bones.

I can tell you with 100% certainty that I, that we, are not the Lord. God says quite plainly to us “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts and God’s ways are not our ways.” We are created in God’s image - yet we are a pale reflection of a god too grand for our human-sized brains to comprehend. In spite of our desire to feel in control, to be “on top of things”, and no matter how many declarative statements we make with absolute certainty—we –our leaders, our scientists, our media tycoons, our ministers, everyone listening to this sermon—we are not God.

Then maybe we are the ones the Lord instructs to prophesy. Speak to the bones, God says, tell them they may live. Speak in many tongues, empowered by the Holy Spirit, so that all who are dead—and all who are walking this earth but are dead inside—may hear the good news.

If we are the ones to prophesy, what do we say? We speak of truth, of life, of the Word made flesh. We speak of justice, of economic and social equality. We speak of the promise of a kingdom where no one dies from a lack of resources, a lack of concern, a lack of being granted their full humanity.

To prophesy is to speak life into an empty place. Prophesy to your neighbor

about the life-giving relationships you find at Pleasant Hill. Prophesy to your

elected leaders. Tell them you care about the economic injustices of inadequate education, non-existent healthcare, poor nutrition, the need for a living wage. Prophesy to all people in your life about the excess cortisol in the systems of anxious Americans who are defined as “other.” Prophesy about the importance of conversation with people who don’t look like us, so we may begin listening to what it is like to be born into this world cloaked in assumptions and prejudice. The sum of all prophecy is sharing the good news that Jesus Christ comes to offer us mercy, grace and forgiveness and to live fully in Him.

And what if we aren’t the Lord and we aren’t the ones to prophesy? That

makes us…the bones. Is it possible things are even worse than all of us being

walking wounded from the stress and realities of this pandemic? Is it

possible we are stumbling through life while dead inside? What if we, the

church, have been holding our hands over our ears, tuning out the Holy

Spirit’s life-giving prophesy for decades or centuries?

Is the church devoting valuable resources to the debate over whom we

welcome in the church and whom we turn away? Or are we using our

spiritual and material gifts to feed Christ’s sheep? Do we invest ourselves in

opinions about property paint colors? Or do we comfort those living inside

barbed wire? Do we show up Sunday mornings to check that “religious” box

or do we connect faith with our life every single day?

Now, with our doors locked, the church that many have declared “closed”

has the opportunity to be open—to be alive—in new ways. The people who

are the church, all of us who follow Christ and seek to model his ministry,

have been set loose. May we, the church, receive the life-giving breath of

the Lord. Shake out our old bones of routine and tradition and inhale the

innovative opportunities of creativity and wonder.

How will we recognize when the Holy Spirit appears to breathe life into these bones? Jennie?

The Rev. Jennie Sankey:

 *(singing the verses)*

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.

I love singing this song with motions, because it reminds me of the physicality of the Holy Spirit. When I think of the three persons of the Triune God, even though it’s all one God, there are certain physical acts that I connect with each one.

With God, I connect the act of creation-bringing light to the darkness, placing stars in the sky, planting seeds in the earth, forming bodies out of dirt-God get’s God’s hands dirty. Then there’s Jesus, fully human, fully God who is born and lives a fully human life-full of aches and pains, hunger and thirst, walking and talking, suffering and celebrating. And then there’s that tricky Holy Spirit. When we try to describe her with words, it easily gets abstract and theoretical. What does it feel like when the Spirit of the Living God “falls afresh on us?”

Ezekiel saw the Living God at work first-hand. When God brought him into a valley full of bones, he must have felt despair descend upon him. What a desolate sight, to stand in the midst of a valley of dry, bleached, and discarded bones. But when God commands Ezekiel to “prophesy to the bones,” they are

transformed before his eyes. He sees the bones rise and connect with sinews, flesh, and skin. He heard the rattle of their movement, as they went from disparate piles to connected bodies. He must have felt the warm breath of God rolling across the valley, grazing his skin, bringing life to all it touched. Ezekiel

felt that the Spirit of the Living God was present with all his senses, and it gave God’s people new vision.

On Pentecost, those gathered witnessed the Holy Spirit make a dramatic entrance. Disconcerted and without guidance, they gathered to celebrate a regular festival in the regular way they always would when new life ‘wooshed’ onto the scene.

Their hair blew and their robes flared as the violent wind swept through the room. Their eyes grew wide as tongues of flame appeared above each of them, crackling, radiating heat, perhaps even smoking a little, filling the room with light. And their ears were in disbelief as their brains processed what they were hearing: languages from every corner of the earth, languages they did not know or recognize. Their tongues were forming sounds they didn’t know they could make, with the taste of a fresh wind in their mouths. Tingles must have been running up and down their spines, butterflies in their stomachs as they took it all in.

With all their senses, they felt that something new had come into their lives, and into the world, and it was Life itself. Christ’s light illuminated a new path, blowing believers to witness to Christ’s life, death, and resurrection to all places and peoples.

Do we know it’s the Holy Spirit when there is wind? Or when we light a candle? Certainly I would encourage you to be reminded of the Spirit’s presence in a gust of wind, or in the crackle of a flame, but not every breeze is the breath of God. How is it that we discern the Holy Spirit’s presence? Theologian Shirley Guthrie says that Christians can expect and recognize the work of God’s Spirit “wherever, by whomever they see life preserved, justice done, hostile individuals and groups reconciled, new beginnings and new life.” The Holy Spirit blows where she will, but with a particular life-bringing gust.

For us today, we need to identify the ways God’s Spirit is falling afresh on us in tangible, physical, REAL ways. For me this week, the Spirit feels like the hot breath inside my mask, when I go to the store.

The breath in my mask is uncomfortable. The mask changes my interactions with people, when they can’t see my smile. It fogs up my glasses. Every time I put it on I count down to when I can take it off, wonder how much longer we’ll be wearing them, and pray that life is preserved, as I protect my neighbors in the aisles from the unknowns that I could carry. And perhaps that’s how I’m pretty sure it’s the Spirit in that stifling breath-because it makes me ask, “what does this mean?” How are you feeling the Spirit this week? In what ways are you involved in preserving life, doing justice, bringing about reconciliation, participating in new beginnings, and witnessing to new life?

When the Spirit “falls afresh on you,” to “melt you, mold you, fill you, use you,” it won’t be with a gentle breeze. It will be a perplexing, even astonishing, gust. The Spirit will put unfamiliar words in your mouth and give new directions to your feet. And maybe more than anything else, you’ll know it’s the Spirit, when windswept and confused, you wonder, “what does this mean?”

The Rev. Katie Day:

“What does this mean?”

When those devout Jews from every nation under heaven witnessed the Holy Spirit poured out on those first followers of Jesus, everyone heard God’s deeds of power being proclaimed in their own native language. *They heard in their own native language.*

Have you ever considered that before? That in this Spirit-breathed moment,

the moment we consider to be the birth story of the Church, the gift of the Spirit was that everyone heard the good news in their own language?

The gift could have been empowering all those folks from different nations to understand the language of the disciples – the language of Jesus himself – Aramaic.

But that wasn’t what the Spirit did. The Holy Spirit, in this first act of gifting the Church, chose diversity over uniformity. What does this mean?

For those listening in that moment, it was bewildering to hear the cacophony of voices, each speaking of God’s mercy and power. The hearers were then “amazed and astonished” by what they were hearing.

It is amazing to hear someone speaking your language, isn’t it? Literally or metaphorically. To be in a place where your primary language isn’t commonly spoken, or to exist in a way that you don’t feel understood, or like you belong – and to hear your language, to understand and feel understood – this is an astonishing gift.

Because it means you don’t have to learn a whole new language to belong. You already belong, you already fit in – God speaks your language, and my language,

and all our languages.

Have you heard the term “biodiversity”? Biodiversity is the variety of living things in any given ecosystem. It’s an important thing, a positive thing – a greater variety of species means a richer and more productive ecosystem. Think of a farm: how grain and grass crops feed cows, and the cows’ waste nourishes the soil that feeds the crops.

But, add in rodents tunneling through fields aerating the soil, earthworms providing drainage, spiders, centipedes, and other insects enriching the soil through droppings,

and the soil becomes even richer, and an even wider variety of crops can grow, which is better for humans and animals alike.

This Pentecost moment, when the Holy Spirit gifted the Church with many languages, is ecclesiastical biodiversity – a theological claim that different is better than same, that diversity makes the Church richer, stronger, more productive.

But then, our story tells us that the hearers went from being “amazed and astonished” to “perplexed” – they find themselves thoroughly at a loss. Because…what does this mean?

It’s one thing to witness this group of folks from Galilee speaking in all these different languages, but what does it mean for those who were hearing it?

The Pentecost experience moved from something happening to them, over there,

to something happening to us. The hearers, too, had been touched by the Spirit,

brought into the story of this new thing God was creating. And now, as we, too, hear this story, witness this God-ordained gift of diversity and inclusion to the Church,

we are brought into the story and must ask ourselves, perhaps bewildered, perhaps amazed, perhaps perplexed, what does this mean?

I don’t think the Church in the 21st century is particularly good at languages. We seem to seek unity through uniformity, conformity – expecting all who might join us

to learn our language, sing our hymns, memorize our prayers, conform to our traditions, our image.

And beyond the Church (but not outside), our nation has outwardly valued diversity

while inwardly, hatred and violence have festered, as a centuries-old public health crisis that isn’t viral but is just as deadly claims still more lives week after week in tragic and heartbreaking ways.

These bones are dusty and dried out, friends. Can they live? Will the breath of God once more move through the Church, inspiring, empowering, calling us into action?

Both of these stories we’ve considered today – Ezekiel and the dry bones rising up

the Holy Spirit blowing through the people at Pentecost Both of these stories are beginnings – a definitive word from God, for sure, but… they are the start of something that is unfinished.

Which is good news. The Church is unfinished, we are unfinished. There is time to attend to the dry bones, there is time to attend to the Spirit’s gift of diversity and call to inclusion. There is time.

But what better time to be unraveled – to be lovingly blown apart by these stories,

to be whisked out and into larger stories… to each in the language of our own lives, but together still– than right now?