



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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May 31, 2009

The Festival of Pentecost

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 51b

Second Lesson: Acts 2:1-21

Gospel: John 14:25-27

God Pours Out the Spirit

On dry bones

To give life

How many times today has somebody asked you, "What are you having for Pentecost dinner?" I'm guessing no one has asked you, right? And I'm guessing more than one or two of you came in here, looked up front and saw the geraniums, saw the red cloth on the side of the altar, saw the candles on the side of the thing and thought, "Oh yeah, it's Pentecost." Tell me, does that ever happen to you on Christmas? You show up and say, "Look, there's a tree! It's Christmas!" Or you show up on Easter and say, "Oh look, it's Easter! There are lilies everywhere." On Easter morning do you hear, "Where are you having Easter dinner?" On Christmas do you hear, "Where are you having Christmas dinner?"

Pentecost is the third major festival of the church year. It takes what Christmas pointed to, which was Easter, and it takes the resurrection of Christ and now pours out the Spirit so that it can become a global message that is powerful and blessed by our God. But because we don't celebrate it outside of church, because we don't give each other red gifts or red cards or something else like that, we probably don't think about it much ahead of time, but what a blessing it is the events that took place on that first Pentecost.

What a blessing it is to gather together today and be reminded by all the red, the fire of the Spirit, the Spirit who lives in our hearts because God poured him out on us. What a blessing it is to be reminded by the cloth that slowly moves from place to place on the sides of our altar that God's Word is always moving. The Spirit is always working through that Word wherever it is preached. Here in this building, at home in our lives, or anywhere else, the Spirit is present as the Word is proclaimed.

We are reminded of these glorious truths today, and we can see them clearly as we look at these Words from the prophet Ezekiel. We see the results in a very picturesque way, a striking picture, a picture that you remember, if you've ever heard it, the picture of the valley of the dry bones. We see God pour out his Spirit on dry bones with only one purpose in mind—that those dry bones might live.

Our God tells us, in the last paragraph of what I just read to you from Ezekiel, that these dry bones are a picture of the children of Israel. They are complaining. They are whining. They are doubting God's presence among them. They feel as though God

has abandoned them and now they are nothing but in graves. That's the picture that they use. So God says, "I am going to take you up out of those graves. I am going to take you back to the land of Israel."

Ezekiel was one of the prophets that were carried off when the first exiles were taken off a number of years before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. He was already in Babylon. There were a number of the leaders of the Kingdom of Judah that were also there with him. They had been warned time and time again by the various prophets to turn back to the Lord or they would be carried off, but the people had not listened. A number had been carried off. Now they were living there, away from Jerusalem, away from the temple, away from the offerings, away from the presence of God in the holy of holies, but they clung to the hope that Jerusalem would stand and that soon they would go back.

Word had just come to them shortly before this in Ezekiel that Jerusalem was in ruins. The temple had been destroyed. Now the rest of the people were being carried off into exile into Babylon. What they were clinging to as their hope that they could get back there to Jerusalem to the temple, now seems to be gone. They are focusing on what they could see. They weren't walking by faith. They were walking by sight. As they saw the sight in their own minds, as they heard the reports of Jerusalem billowing in smoke and the temple destroyed without one stone standing upon another, they said, "We are like we are in graves. We are dried up. God has abandoned us. There is no hope. God, where are you?"

You and I might wonder how they could say that. But be honest, do you ever go through things in life where you think to yourself in one way or shape, maybe in the dark corners of your mind that you don't always readily acknowledge or you try to keep that voice quiet, do you ever think to yourself "God, where are you? Why are you letting this happen? Why am I going through this God? This isn't right. This isn't fair." You and I spend a lot of times in our lives where we are going to feel like those children of Israel. As we are honest with ourselves and admit this truth, God's Spirit will also work in us as we see God's answer to feeling as though you have been abandoned by God.

He gives this incredible vision. I wonder; did Ezekiel have trouble sleeping for awhile after seeing this? Would you like to have this vision? It says he was taken by the Spirit to this valley. Would you like to be there walking through a valley surrounded by nothing but bones, bones that are very dry, and looking as far as the eye can see and all you can see are bones? Bodies scattered; bones here and there. Then God asks him that question, "Can these bones live?" The answer is obvious. Of course not, they are very dry, right? They aren't going to live. They are dead. It's obvious. There's no life in these bones. Why are you asking that God? But notice that Ezekiel is walking by faith and not by sight and he says, "Only you know Lord. I can't answer that. I can't do anything about it, but you are the sovereign Lord. You can do something about it."

So then he tells Ezekiel to prophesy, to speak his message, which is what prophecy is—speaking God's Word—to, usually God's people, but in this case to these bones.

“Go talk to some bones.” I know if you’re the parent of a teenager, that’s what it feels like you are doing at times, but he is literally talking to bones. He wants him to say to the bones, “The breath is going to come to you from the four corners. It is going to enter you. You are going to come together and you will live. That’s God’s Word to you bones.”

Then he says it. Do you think he jumped when all of a sudden he heard a noise and he starts to hear a rattling as bone clicks against bone and they come together? Do you think the picture he sees of tendons, ligaments, flesh, skin covering over all that, do you think that stuck with him for a little while?

They come together. They are bodies, but they are still lying there. Now they are bodies again that he can see, but there is still no breath in them. So God says, “Prophecy to the breath, come from the four corners and enter them so that they may stand up and live. Then people will know that I am the Lord.” And that’s what happens.

The people that Ezekiel would have first shared this message with, this vision with, probably have a decided advantage over you and me as we first hear it or read it because when he explains it and he says, “I will put my Spirit in them,” that might come to us as kind of a surprise after hearing all this talk about breath. But in Hebrew, the word “breath” is the same word that’s used for “Spirit.” So prophecy to the breath, or prophecy to the Spirit would be what they were hearing—the breath of life, the Spirit of life, just like in Genesis when the breath of life came into Adam.

Here we see God pour out his Spirit so that these dead bones that look like a body again but had no life in them come to life and stand up, and God says, “This is what I am going to do for you, children of Israel. I am going to take you out of your exile. I am going to bring you back to the land, and where you think you are now in a grave, I will bring you up out of it. I will bring you back to life and I will put you back there and your descendants will worship at my temple. They will see the fulfillment of all my prophecies. They will see the Messiah. The Spirit will come in them and they will live.”

In a very real sense, when we are born into this world, we are dry bones. We are nothing but a sack of bones walking on our way to hell because we are separated from God. We are sinners. If God doesn’t act, if he doesn’t act through the Word or through the Sacraments to bring us to faith, to pour out the Spirit on us, we might look like we have life. We might look like we have skin attached to us. We might be able to talk. We might be able to laugh. We might be able to do a lot of things, but we are nothing but a sack of bones walking to hell.

But God has poured out his Spirit on us through Baptism, through the Word. And he continues to pour out the Spirit on us as we come to his altar and receive our Savior’s very body and blood for the forgiveness of our sins. Our God works in us in ways that are incredible, as incredible as the rattling sound of dry bones coming together. He works in us through Word and water and wafer and wine, and he changes us from people that are on the way to hell to people that are now his heirs, his children, people

who are forgiven for all the times that we, not only the sins that we have been born with, but all the times that we have doubted God, all the times that we shook our fist at God and said, "What are you doing?;" all the times that we have wandered after our own path and left the path of God behind. He has made us truly alive as the Spirit works in us.

When we face those days when we feel like we are back to being dry bones, our God wants to send his Spirit into our hearts. He does it through his Word. He does it through his Sacraments. He comes to us and says, "Focus again on the love I have for you. I myself died for your sins. I myself was perfect in your place. I myself went through everything you go through, and I did it perfectly so that even though you fall, you are forgiven. Never doubt my love or my good intentions for you."

Our God has never promised us that this life will be without difficulty. He has never said it. He is abundantly clear in the Gospels that it's through much suffering that we are going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. And Paul repeats it over and over in his letters. But through it all, he tells us that even with all these sufferings, he has enough power, the one who makes dry bones live, to cause them to work for our good even when we can't imagine how any of it could possibly be for our good. That's when we just need to be quiet and say, "Lord, you made dry bones that's me, come to life. Lord, I'm going to trust you that you are going to make this work out for my good."

That's not easy. Many a Christian who had been made alive by God when faced with challenges like this has walked away from God and became dry bones again. That's why our God fills you and me with his Spirit. As he fills us with his Spirit, he wants us to share that good news of salvation and build up those who are weak, those who are struggling, and those who are straying. He wants us to be his arms to hold up the weak. He wants us to be his hand to wash away the tears of those who are mourning. He wants us to be his love that supports and strengthens one another.

The more you and I get into the Word of God, the more we will be able to do this incredible task that our God gives to us, because it's not we who do it. It's the Spirit of God who lives in us that does it.