

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Pentecost

**PRAYER:** Give thanks to God, O my soul, and all that is within me praise God's holy name. We come, O God, to give you honour and glory. We gather to bless you for your countless gifts. Alive with your Spirit and made whole by Christ's love, we praise your name. The heavens portray the extent of your wisdom; the earth is full of your handiwork. We join in creation's song, lauding your name with the glad praises we bring. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** The prophet Joel declares that in the last days God's Spirit will be poured out upon all flesh. "All it shall be that whoever calls on God shall be saved." Know that as you call on God's name, Christ intercedes on your behalf to deliver you in righteousness, blameless before God.

**STEWARDSHIP:** With God's Spirit within us we pour out our gifts in his presence. May God take us and use us as he sees fit. Where speaking can bring a sense of God's righteousness, we offer our voices to proclaim his will. Where our efforts can free others from bondage, we offer our strength to help in time of need. We bring ourselves to be used for Christ's sake. May God show us the way, and we will respond.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** O Gracious, loving God, you know us far better than we know ourselves. O how we love to make grand claims about our own achievements. Our communities are littered with monuments to our own sense of greatness. In arrogance we think we are the key to understanding what this world is about. But it is all lifeless bones. No matter how far we go in our self-awareness and self-promotion, it is but dry and useless dust. Like the prophet Ezekiel we stand on the edge of our world and observe it full of symbols of the fallen and soon forgotten accomplishments of humanity. Our hearts break at the level of violence, injustice, poverty and general human misery that plagues us all, and we wonder, can these bones live? Is there still hope for us?

O how we want your wind to blow; your Spirit to move among us. For you, to turn our lifeless achievements into declarations of your presence among us. We thank you for the sounds of these dry bones rattling. For your presence working in all corners of the world. How your Spirit is inspiring men and women to feed the hungry, heal the sick, and bring hope where before none existed. We thank you for your eternal call to your children to prophesy over these dead bones of the world. To call regularly and faithfully to the powers and principalities to stop their unholy thirst for control at any cost. A call, to put an end to the crushing weight of prejudice. A call, to wipe tears from the eyes of the distressed. A call to turn swords into ploughshares. Renew in us, O God our calling to prophesy; to speak on your behalf to this world. Renew our sense of hope, so that we may pass it along to others who have none.

O let your Spirit blow life into us. Let resurrection be the rallying cry of your people. Let us feel the loss of death's sting and the lost victory of the grave. If we are crushed today, by death dark shadow, raise us up. If fear lurks around every corner for us, grant us the assurance of your rod and staff. Let your Spirit pour out on us today in a way we have never experienced before. Let us see the miracles of your hand, at work among us, so there can be no doubt as to who is watching over us.

Let your Spirit come, O Lord, and gather in the lost sheep. If there is confusion, grant clarity. If sin has gripped us, grant us deliverance. If we have wandered far from the sheep fold, come and carry us back. Renew in us, the joy of our salvation.

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Pentecost

Call us to celebrate the wonderful, matchless, grace of Christ. We know it is not enough for your people to have their minds engaged in your kingdom, for you also require our hearts.

**BENEDICTION:** Holy Spirit, steer us from our path of destruction into the way of life. Sustain us as we go with the bread and the wine of the new world. Guide us to your beacon, endowing our ability and inspiring our will. Be our bridge over troubled waters and the step that moves our feet. And be ahead of us, among us, and behind us until our journey's end. Amen.

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Pentecost

Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Acts 2:1-21

“Dem Dry Old Bones.”

I came across a modern-day proverb that reads, “Children are unpredictable-you never know how far up the wall they are going to drive you.” Your response tells me, there is some truth to that proverb. As much as we love our children, they really do know how to press our buttons. Mostly, the effort is made, to sway us into doing something for the child we would rather not do, like buy candy, or a new toy.

I am sure you have noticed that the ultimate strategy, that a child employs to win over the parent, is the dreaded “temper tantrum”. And have you noticed that children learn very early on, that a temper tantrum works its full magic in a public place, like a grocery store, candy aisle. The child, somehow knows, that their parent would rather avoid public embarrassment than maintain discipline, so they start into the routine of fussing, screaming, and shouts of “unfair, unfair.”

The louder the child gets the more eyes in the public place turn in their direction, causing mom or dad to gush embarrassment. The parent thinks, because they have said it about other parents before themselves, that people are saying, “Why can’t she or he control their spoiled brat?” You’ve been there and done that, haven’t you? The ultimate in temper tantrum techniques, as you may well be aware, is the holding of the breath.

In absolute defiance, and rage, the small tot threatens to suffocate themselves by holding their breath. So, there little Timmy or little Suzy stands, arms crossed, scowled face, and puffed up cheeks, as they threaten to turn blue. Well, I’ve got a secret, for anyone who may have to deal with a child who undertakes this strategy. If a child threatens to stop breathing, call their bluff. Tell them, “Go ahead.”

You see they can’t do it, at least not for very long. The human body is an amazing thing, and breathing is so valuable an enterprise for us, that it is actually controlled involuntarily by our brains. We can go through a whole day, and never once be even conscious of the fact we are breathing. The same is certainly true when we are asleep. You may or may not have noticed that if you exert yourself physically like in exercise, your brain dictates the rate of respiration, with nary a thought from us.

Not one of us can kill ourselves from holding our breath. If, it does get to the point where we are consciously holding our breath too long, and the CO<sub>2</sub> level is too high in our blood stream, the brain will actually place us unconscious, to regain control of our breathing. Breathing is so important to us, that anything that threatens our ability to breathe well, causes us great anxiety. People who suffer from claustrophobia, a fear of enclosed places, often say they can’t breathe in enclosed spaces.

People, who suffer from asthma, or other respiratory ailments, find the least little particulate in the air, an impediment to good breathing. Breathing is so vital to us, that certain expressions have entered our common vocabulary, to indicate an emotional state, rather than a breathing problem.

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Pentecost

“I am going out for a breath of fresh air.” This can mean a nice walk, or it can be a way of excusing ourselves from a tense social situation, such as during a heated argument with your spouse.

If someone says to you, “You’re suffocating me” what are they saying? Do they mean you have a pillow over their face, or more likely, are they talking about their personal space being infringed upon? Breathing, something so natural to us, and so vital, and we barely give it any thought at all, until something goes wrong. Now here is a question, whose answer is so obvious, you may wonder why I even ask it, but bear with me.

If anyone one of us was to stop breathing, or if we happened to find someone not breathing, what would we assume is their state of affairs. Are they sleeping? No, because I already mentioned, sleeping people breathe. We would, quite accurately, say that a person not breathing is dead, or without CPR soon will be. In fact, when rescue people first come to an unconscious body, one of the things they check, to see if a person is still alive, is whether or not they are breathing.

I am not trying to be morbid, but when do we normally see bodies not breathing? In my experience it is usually at the funeral home. Without breath, there is no life. I mention this obvious point, to shine a light on something critical in the passage from Ezekiel 37. It is an amazing story of Ezekiel, standing on the edge of a large valley filled with bones. The bones were dry and scattered about with no discernable pattern.

God speaks to Ezekiel and says, “Son of man, can these bones become living people again?” Now, I must admit, that had I been in Ezekiel’s shoes, I would likely have said something like, “It has never happened before, so no these bones cannot live again.” Ezekiel though, was smarter than I would have been, for his faith called him to answer this way. “O Sovereign lord, you alone know the answer to that.”

I am reminded of the show “Family Feud”, when the contestants would respond to a good answer to one of the game’s questions with, “Good answer! Good answer!” As we know, from the text, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones.

“Dry bones; listen to the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Look! I am going to breathe into you and make you alive again! I will put flesh and muscles on you and cover you with skin. I will put breath into you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.”

So, Ezekiel did as he was commanded, and this marvelous display of God’s power and sovereignty over life and death begins. The bones join together, ligaments form, muscles build up around the bones, and then skin surrounded their bodies. Now instead of a valley filled with dry bones, there is a valley now filled with bodies, all lying about. Now, here is the critical point I am trying to make, it happens at the very end of verse 8.

The last phrase of that verse reads, “Then skin formed to cover their bodies, but they still had no breath in them.”

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Pentecost

It was a wondrous thing; God taking these dry bones, and putting flesh on them, but the critical element to bring life, to bring hope, to bring anything of value in this valley that was nothing but death; is... breath. Breath is life. So, Ezekiel prophesied, and the four winds came and brought this army to life, and they stood up. But this incredible story is not just to create soldiers. This event is about hope. God tells Ezekiel that Israel is like these dry bones, whose hope is gone. But God will resurrect Israel, and its people.

The point God is making, is vital for all of us, particularly on the Day of Pentecost; true life, as God intended, a vital life full of hope, can only come to us if we have breath. But, and here is the thing, God is not talking about oxygen entering our lungs. If that was what God meant, then animals and plants that breathe would be living abundant lives, full of hope. I don't think a tulip has any awareness of hope.

No, the breath, God is talking about, is his breath. Another word for the Hebrew word *breath* is *spirit*. God's breath then, is his Spirit. To truly be alive, we need God's Spirit in us. Completing the analogy of Ezekiel then, we can conclude that without God's breath in us we are: dead, lifeless, or empty shells. Now I recognize that biologically, all of us in this room are alive. We are drawing breath, meaning oxygen.

But God, who is our creator, so he should know, says that doesn't mean we are truly alive. Without God's Spirit in us, there is no vitality, and no hope in us. I take it from Ezekiel 37 then, that we can drink our required 8 glasses of water a day, and still be nothing but dry bones. Speaking of water, Jesus said essentially the same thing as Ezekiel learned in John 4, when we meet the Samaritan woman at the town well.

Jesus asks the woman to draw out some water, and give him a drink, and what takes place is a discussion of two kinds of water. To sum up the discussion, Jesus says in John 4:13-14, "People soon become thirsty again after drinking this water. (Meaning the water in the well) But the water I give them takes away thirst altogether, it becomes a perpetual spring within them, giving them eternal life."

We must not get lost in the analogies of water and breath, but in both cases the point is the same. There is more to life than simple biology. To truly be alive, means more than proper nutrition. Furthermore, you cannot find this greater level of life on your own. Neither Ezekiel, nor the bones, brought about this new life. God did. In John 4, Jesus says to the woman, "If you only knew the gift God has for you, and who I am, you would ask me, and I would give you living water."

The breath of life, that brings hope, is a gift. It is grace. We cannot create it ourselves, or make God give it to us. He offers it to us freely. Now perhaps you have wondered what this abundant life is supposed to be like. How do we know we are filled with God's breath? This is a delicate subject, not just because of differences in theological opinion among denominations, but rather the personal implications.

Many, wonderful Christian people, go through life with this unspoken fear that they are not filled with God's breath.

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018  
Pentecost

They believe that they are somehow, missing out on something truly marvelous. It is one of the major reasons that “charismatic movements” in the church, that proclaim signs and wonders, attract so many people. When claims are made of healings, speaking in tongues, slayings in the spirit, and many other signs, people are drawn because they fear they are missing the Holy Spirit, or breath of God in their lives.

The question that plagues us is this, “If the Spirit of God is upon me, why don’t, incredible and miraculous things happen to me, or from me?” Have you entertained such questions? Maybe, your charismatic friends’ insistence on signs and wonders has discouraged you. Made you’ve wondered if God really loves you, and even if he did, where is the breath of God in me? Now I have an observation to share with you that seems profound to me and may help us all get a handle on how the Holy Spirit works in our lives.

In reading Ezekiel 37, it is very clear that the Holy Spirit is upon Ezekiel, wouldn’t you agree? The breath of God has filled him. Now, having said that, what is the first thing the Spirit of God has Ezekiel do? What is the first sign of the breath of God? Ezekiel 37:4, “Speak to these bones.” In other words, prophesy. What is the sign of the breath of God in every single prophet ever recorded? They prophesied.

Prophesying means; speaking under God’s influence. It can mean speaking about the future, but that is only a small part of what the word means. The first and foremost sign of the breath of God on anyone is they prophesy. In Acts chapter 2, the day the church of Christ was born, the Holy Spirit descended upon the gathered believers like a rushing wind, and what looked like (don’t miss this please) tongues of fire. Tongues!

The very first thing the assembled group does after being filled by the Spirit, is what? “They began to speak in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.” People tend to focus on the different languages and miss the point. The point, emphasized by the tongues of fire, is that the Holy Spirit led them to prophesy. In many languages they spoke about the wonderful things God had done.

In the confusion of the moment, the Apostle Peter steps forward with the other disciples, and calls for attention. Peter quotes the prophet Joel, “In the last days, God said, I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions and your old men will dream dreams.” There it is again, prophesying as a sign of the Spirit.

And let me point out that Peter rises under the direction of the Holy Spirit, and what does he do? He preaches, or he prophesies. Let’s cut through all the misconceptions about prophesy, and simply say this; prophesy is speaking God’s word, into any situation, at any time. We know the breath of God is in us every time we speak the truth of God, whether it is to one person or to thousands.

This is also one way we are salt and light to the world. So, let me ask you this. You see something you know is wrong or is going to harm someone else. You feel compelled to speak up to stop the harm. Why did you do that? What compelled you to intervene? Why didn’t you just mind your own business, because a lot of other folks would?

Sunday May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Pentecost

Maybe when you did this, you felt a bit self-conscious, a bit out of your comfort zone, but you couldn't stop yourself. Maybe you are talking to a friend, whose life is a real mess, and out of somewhere, a truth of scripture comes to mind, and you share it, and it refocuses your friend's heart. Where did that come from?

You find yourself grieving over a loss, or anxious about a crisis, and the words of assurance from the bible, or even a hymn come rushing in? In the terror of the moment you find yourself singing, 'Blessed Assurance.' Where did that come from? The church is in a serious discussion about a critical matter, and someone gets up and says the right thing, at the right moment, to ease tension and create consensus. Where did that come from?

We know from whence this all comes, it comes from the breath of God flowing through us. I am not trying to downplay other signs of the Spirit. I acknowledge that other wonderful signs exist, but the primary sign of the Spirit seems to be prophesying. Perhaps, the devil has been beating us up, with the idea that we are less valuable to the Kingdom of God, because we don't see the other more famous signs; tongues, miracles etc.

The devil knows, that should God's people, take seriously our call and empowerment to prophesy, this world will be turned upside down to God's favour. If you want to see evidence of God's Spirit in you, prophesy. Tell the world about the wonderful things God has done. Hold the world accountable to a higher standard. Encourage your neighbours and friends with God assurance.

Stand over the dry bones of this world and prophesy and then watch in amazement as disjointed lives are put back together, and new breath fills their being. Can these bones littered about in this world live? By the power of God, yes, yes they can!