

From Dry Bones to Life

Imagine along with me that we live almost two thousand years ago. We live on the island Crete and by religion we are Jewish. Our great grandmother lived in Jerusalem but fled with family members during a violent conflict. She married a local and now, several generations later, you and I no longer speak any Aramaic. We still maintain the old faith. In fact, every year we make a long and expensive voyage to Jerusalem for the feast of Shavuot, or what we call Pentecost, where we bring offerings and hear two stories –if we can find someone to translate them for us. One is the story of God coming down in fire to give Moses the law. The other story is about a widow who left her own country and her family to travel with her mother-in-law to a foreign land. She offered the kind of risk-taking, sacrificial love that the scriptures say God offers to the people of Israel.

This year we head to Jerusalem and arrive, preparing ourselves to be cheated because we don't speak the right language and the locals treat us as less than human. "Cretans," they say, "are always liars, vicious brutes, lazy gluttons."¹ They insist that we speak their language and when we don't it seems to justify their assumption that we are lazy. We will go to the same temple, but like all the

¹ Titus 1:12b

other Jews arriving from other countries, we will stick to ourselves. It's easier that way. We may serve the same God, but we have little to do with each other.

And then one morning, as we are walking down a narrow street in the old city, we hear this vicious sound like a gale-force wind. And from an open window we hear someone talking about God and for the first time in our lives we are in Jerusalem and hearing our own language. Someone tells us the speaker is Galilean and that is even more shocking because those guys are just country bumpkins. How can he speak our language? We are amazed and perplexed. Folks from other countries are having the same experience. People near us from Jerusalem sneer. They think the Galileans are drunk, but we know they are talking to us in a way that no one ever talks to us in this city. And the things they are saying are remarkable.

They say that the prophet Joel had promised this – that the Spirit would no longer be outside us, engaged in some dramatic act of power and then disappearing for years or centuries. The Spirit we had heard about is now poured on all flesh, men and women alike, young and old, slaves as well as free people. All of us shall dream dreams, led by this Spirit to imagine what we could never imagine on our own. We will all share in prophesying and seeing the Lord's glory here on earth. The world is being turned upside down and none of the old

divisions matter anymore. The Spirit is with us, the Spirit is uniting us, the Spirit is leading us into new dreams.

At least that's how the scene suggests itself to me. Pentecost is considered the birth of the church. And how does that birth happen? It happens through the pouring out of the Holy Spirit and suddenly the divisions of language, culture, and ethnicity are overcome. The Spirit isn't talking solely to Moses or some wild-eyed prophet or to a single nation, the Spirit is addressing everyone, all at the same time, and in a way they all can understand. That is the birth of the church! It is dramatic both in how it comes about and in what it proclaims: God can now reside within us and help us see what we have not been able to see on our own! Imagine what that must have been like.

Pentecost seems to be the fulfillment of the prophecy God gave Ezekiel. That was another dramatic moment. In a vision, Ezekiel is standing in a vast valley full of bones—for as far as he can see there are piles of dried, disconnected, abandoned bones. And then God asks, "Can these bones live?" Before Ezekiel's eyes bone comes together with bone, muscles entwine around the bones, organs and flesh inhabit them, and skin covers them. But they still have no life force. They are bodies but not beings. And God says, "Prophesy to the breath and say, 'Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath and breathe upon

these slain that they may live.” And now the bodies say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” Then the words of the Lord come saying, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live...”

I think that the birth of the Church, the arrival of the Holy Spirit, brought life where there had been death—brought entirely new ways of understanding how to relate to one another as children of God, across every known culture, ethnicity, class, gender, and language. In declaring that none of the old divisions mattered anymore, the Spirit awakened hearts and bodies that were dead to any compelling imagination of who God is and what God was doing in their midst.

The arrival of the church probably brought an awareness of a kind of spiritual deadness, and the need for new dreams and for a heart of flesh capable of reaching out to God and others in love.

So, when you think of the wider Church today, are we like that dynamic early collection of believers spread across Asia and Europe, with sinews and flesh and bone newly alive and burning with dreams given by the Spirit? Are we like the dried bones, dismembered and bereft, calling out, “Our hope is lost; we are cut off completely”? Are we something in between? If we, the Church, aren’t burning with dreams and following the Spirit into the radical path of love that Jesus modeled, what might draw us back into that space?

Our service of baptism asks us to renounce the powers of this world that corrupt and destroy the creatures of God, and then invites us to covenant to vows that we will renew in a few moments. These vows include pursuing God and fellowship with one another, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, striving for justice and peace, and respecting the dignity of every human being. In the absence of these behaviors, behaviors the Spirit is continually calling us to, the Church grows dry and brittle, the Church lacks sinews and flesh and skin, the Church fails to breathe in the available breath of God and to be equipped for the glorious thing God is bringing into life.

Last Pentecost, closely following the murder of George Floyd, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry preached about the way we have been facing two pandemics: a viral pandemic and a spiritual pandemic. He identified the cure for the second pandemic as the “unselfish, sacrificial love” modeled by Jesus.² Unselfish, sacrificial love asks us to take stock of what is broken in us as a Church, of the toll taken by the Church’s complicity with things like slavery and racism, and to invite the Spirit to help us dream new dreams. When we do that, held in that giant armchair of God’s love for us, we are able to breathe in the breath of God and to experience our dry bones coming back to life again.

² <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-the-most-rev-michael-b-curry-2/>

Here is where I typically end with some kind of exhortation, or invitation – allowing you to explore how to make that invitation practical within the context of your life. However, what I would like to do today is suggest a specific action. Last November, our diocese voted to adopt a Covenant to Root out Racism. I am inviting you to read that covenant over the next few weeks, to reflect on it with curiosity and openness, and to pray about it. What dreams does it invite us to dream? This covenant begins with a lament, in which we recognize what the Church has done, or failed to do, in the face of racialized harm to so many children of God. The covenant then includes a series of specific commitments that we believe the Holy Spirit is calling us to as part of our healing and openness to transformation.

I imagine that this covenant will not feel completely comfortable to some of us. That is why I am inviting you to reflect on it with a posture of curiosity and prayer, and I will make myself available to you if you have questions or concerns. On June 20, we will include the lament and the commitments from this covenant in our Sunday liturgy, so we have a few weeks to sit with these words and to notice what dreams the Spirit is placing in our hearts. May we have courage to go where the Holy Spirit leads as the Church returns to its Pentecost roots.

For God has said, “I shall put my spirit within you and you shall live.”