

Pentecost 2021  
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC  
The Rev. Catherine L. Tatem  
May 23, 2021

Ezekiel 37:1-14   Psalm 104:25-35, 37   Acts 2:1-21   John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Today (in our readings) we travel from the time of the prophet Ezekiel, back to creation, forward to the time of the psalms of King David, to the very early days of what will be Christianity – that wonderful history in the book of Acts. In the gospel we go back to the Upper Room on the night before Jesus' resurrection – and all these times and places have something to say to us today.

Ready? Let's go!

They were all there together in one place, a crowd of about 120 people, and eleven apostles in the upper room; by drawing lots Matthias was added to the witnesses of Jesus' resurrection, the apostles of our Lord. Twelve apostles, 120 people – the crowd ... and 3,000 people joined "The Way" on the day of Pentecost. I am not comfortable in crowds yet ... eleven or twelve people; I am sort of okay. 120 people? I am looking around, trying to move away from anyone "too close" to me (that's not 6 feet! my brain nudges, even with a new 3' guideline, looking for the masked and unmasked, nervous about how I will be judged for my own choice. That's me, and at the same time we are in a wonderful time of transition. This past year or so has changed us. I am not comfortable in a "new normal" masquerading as our old way of being. How are you feeling in this Pentecost crowd? Comfortable, anxious, calm, ... indifferent? You might have been trying to get to another street in Jerusalem, and the streets are clogged with visitors to the city ... **get out of my way!**

Get out of my way. Nothing and no one can get in our way like Holy Spirit can. A rushing wind, flames like fire on all of our heads ... and we each hear the word of God in a way that we understand. It is true: something always happens when the Holy Spirit shows up. She, the Spirit, has been around for a very long time. In Genesis 2, "God God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the human became a living being." The breath of life is the Hebrew word "ruah, breath, wind; in Greek the word is pneuma, breath;" it is the spirit of life. The Holy Spirit "hovered over the deep" before creation, gave life to human beings, shows up like a dove at Jesus' baptism, and dances like fire on the day of Pentecost and now, in each of us. When the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and on the crowd in Jerusalem, there was no mistaking the new day for the old one.

The day of Pentecost is a complete reversal of the story of the Tower of Babel. After the Flood, the descendants of Noah – "the whole world – had one language and the same words." (Gen 11.1) God said, scatter and fill the world. We said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves." We knew we would be really something if we were on the same level as God. In response, God scattered the people and confused the languages so that there were many languages, many people. On Pentecost, the babel, the confusion, ends. All are one in Christ. As Paul writes in Galatians, "<sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring,

heirs according to the promise.” We are all one in Christ Jesus. The tower of Babel has come down.

The same spirit that hovered over the deep and that sent Jesus into the desert, brought Ezekiel to a dry desert valley. Prophecy, mortal, prophecy to the bones like this. “God will cause breath (ruah, spirit) to enter you and you shall live”. Prophecy to the people of Israel who have no hope left, to those today who have so little hope left that they themselves feel like dried bones in a desert. Feeling dry, isolated, stripped of hope and of human connection – we are but bones, after all, God says prophecy to the breath, and live. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. This is God’s new creation! God puts the scattered bones into order/skeletons, adds sinew and muscles and skin; the Spirit breathes new life into those scattered and shattered hopes. In God, even the dead can live. Welcome to that new day.

In our order of readings the psalm is our response to the Word of God – our response is worship and praise!

“I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praise to my God while I have being. <sup>34</sup>I rejoice in the Lord. Bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord!”

In our whirlwind tour of Scripture, we go back to the Upper Room on the night before Jesus’ crucifixion. Jesus is talking with his disciples:

Jesus says: “I will send you the Advocate; the Advocate is the Holy Spirit; she comes from God, and is the spirit of Truth”. At Jesus’ trial before Pilate, Jesus says, “For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Pilate’s deeply ironic reply is “What is truth?”

The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, the breath, “ruah” of God, is present with us today. That rush of the Spirit, so hot it is like flame, still gives us life. Here from Samuel Chadwick, is what happens when we breathe in this breathe of the Holy Spirit:

"Spirit filled souls are ablaze for God. They love with a love that glows. They serve with a faith that kindles. They serve with a devotion that consumes. They hate sin with fierceness that burns. They rejoice with a joy that radiates. Love is perfected in the fire of God."

Remind me – remind ourselves: what did the disciples do to receive the Holy Spirit? They gathered. “There they were, all in one place.” It is time again for us to gather. As helpful, as life-sustaining or at least necessary as online worship has been, we belong in community, living and breathing and serving together. We will continue to have some form of online presence for those who cannot be here in person. However, being together “all in one place” breathes life back into us; it can bring us back from deadened hopes, from loneliness and despair. Church allows us to share shouts of joy as well as tears, quiet prayer and brass voices, sounds that are not words. We may have restrictions at various times: masks, distancing, communion in one kind. No restriction defines us. No inconvenience can separate us. No restriction prevents us from joining the psalmist in joyful shouts of praise.

To be clear: I continue to be thankful for the many ways we have been gathering. Still, when we have been away from each other for so long, we begin to question: “do I still belong there? Are these my people? Is there a place for me?” The answer is a resounding YES. The only way to feel that truth is to show up and to share the gifts that you have with each other. This work of being church is messy. We see each other’s wounds – even the wounds on Jesus – and we long for the old or cannot wait for something new. Being church is big and messy and absolutely necessary. We still need to connect with those who physically or safely cannot be with us. We need to be here on Sundays and Mondays and Saturdays, or whenever our version of the outpouring of the Spirit calls us to be here. If this is all a little uncomfortable, welcome to the body of Christ. Welcome to a world made new. Nothing will stop the love of God in giving us new life. Ever since the church began, something has threatened it: war, genocide, natural disasters, ... prayer book revision. Yes, a parishioner in approximately 1970 held up a trial version (the Zebra book) and declared, “This, ladies and gentlemen, is the book that will finally destroy the church.” It did not. A colleague of mine stood on the beach the day after hurricane Katrina destroyed 5 churches on the Gulf Coast in MS and said: “the building is gone. The church is still standing. A pandemic is but a speck in the eyes of the One who can lift up dried bones, put flesh on them, and breathe life into them. This same One lifted up Jesus, will lift us up, and let loose upon us the fiery breath of the Holy Spirit. We who are the church need everyone to join in, with worship, volunteering, tithing – giving of our whole selves, so that we, too, can prophesy to the world: “Live.”

Are you ready? Let’s go!

Come, Holy Spirit, and set our hearts on fire!