

‘What does this mean?’

Ezekiel 37: 1-14; Acts 2: 1-13

Today is Pentecost. Today is red. Today is unreal.

And the reality of this unreality of Pentecost is found in both scripture passages read this morning. For both passages talk about unbelievable possibilities. So what shall we do with them?

One of the most delightful passages to preach from is Ezekiel 37: the Valley of the Dry Bones. It is an unbelievable story about an unbelievable God. And yet the truth it proclaims is solid and accurate.

Ezekiel was a prophet in the Old Testament. We know little about him except this particular passage. Israel was in exile. Babylon had overrun the nation in 587 BC and people were living in exile under the rule of their captors. In the fifth year of this exile, Ezekiel saw his focus shift from rebuke of his people to deliverance of his people.

Let's be crystal clear. Our story is a vision which Ezekiel had. A picture from God. An illustration of the situation of the Israelite people in exile.

Notice verse 1: Ezekiel was brought out by the Spirit of the Lord. A clear indication of the fact that he was having a vision. God was speaking to him about the desperate situation of the Israelite people.

Do you have visions? Does God's Spirit lead you? I think many of us have visions. Many of us have nudges by God about certain people or certain situations. Many of us feel led about certain convictions on which we wonder whether to act or not.

I do not think it is that far-fetched. God is within us. God speaks to us. God gives us direction. Or that is what a relationship with God is all about. That inner connection between my life and God's. That relationship that helps us in the good times as well as the difficult times.

When did God last speak to you? When did God last nudge you about your partner or spouse; about your children; about your job; about your personal spiritual status? I think it happens often - - at least more often than we give God credit.

We write these times off. We don't think anyone will take us seriously. We assume people will scoff at what we are thinking. So we hesitate.

Let me suggest the next time that happens to you - - that is God speaking to you - - you check it out. In the reformed or Presbyterian tradition, we believe that God speaks to us or our situation is best checked out when confirmed by others! We don't believe that simply declaring God told me to do something or declaring what is God's will is valid just because we declare it. Or simply because we feel so strongly about something.

NO, confirmation of God speaking to me comes when it is validated by other people - - friends, clergy, relatives. Our best example is when someone feels called to be a pastor or an Elder or a Church Leader. That calling is validated by others in the church affirming that same call. So the community affirms and confirms the call.

In personal situations when you think God is pushing you to talk seriously about a problem with someone, get some help. Reach out to a lifeline and get some validation before taking action. It is an important way the Spirit of the Lord speaks to us.

So the Spirit of the Lord spoke to Ezekiel. The Spirit took Ezekiel to a valley full of dry bones. God's Spirit did not just give Ezekiel a panoramic view of the valley from on top of a ridge.

No, Ezekiel was led around among those bones. They were numerous. They were very dry. The bone marrow had disappeared from them. They had become brittle being out in the weather. They were just laying there. Nothing but bones....dry bones....dead bones.

I wondered how many bones are in a human body. So I checked. We are born with about 270 bones and by adulthood with some bones fusing, the adult body has about 220 bones.

So imagine how many bones were in that valley...220 times 500 bones is lots of bones! That is what Ezekiel was viewing.

God confronts Ezekiel with a question: can these bones live?

That's often a question we all face: can the dry bones of my life live? Can they come to real life?

All of us have been in the valley of dry bones. Whether it was a bout with depression. Or losing a child or spouse. Or a divorce. Or getting fired. Or getting a really bad medical diagnosis. Or retiring, wondering what to do. Or going bankrupt. Or being in a horrible wreck. Yes, every one of us has had our valley of dry bones.

As a world we are in the valley of dry bones in the pandemic. Searching for answers to the question of whether we can live again? Can the church survive? Can we recover financially after the pandemic? What will life look like post-pandemic?

And we have seen the dry bones - - literally - - from trailers full of bodies that have died. To the cremation fires in India. To the mass graves of people being buried from contracting COVID-19.

We, actually, are in the middle of this very question right now. We are in the middle of a significant transition. In his book, TRANSITIONS, Robert Bridges suggest that transitions are rich opportunities for personal growth and renewal.

He suggests transitions are like job changes; personal changes in one's life; relocation to a new place geographically; getting married; retirement; moving to a continuing care retirement community; building a new house.

Bridges suggests that first, something must come to an end. Life has changed and will be different. I think we are approaching that in this country with the Pandemic. You as a congregation are approaching that with the end of temporary pastorates. Laura Sugg is approaching that as she finishes her ministry in Denver.

Bridges then suggests we enter a Neutral Zone - - a time of dislocation, adjustment, lack of clarity, or could be despair and difficulty. "No Man's Land!" A place you have never been before. The old has ended, but the new is

not quite going. We have given up the old, but we are not fully sure about the new.

That is where we find Ezekiel in the valley of dry bones. He is facing the reality that what was is no longer. Yet, the picture of the future is unclear.

The pandemic is about to end for which we are grateful but what will post-pandemic look like?

We have had a good run with Jane and Jewell-Ann and me (I hope!) and that is ending. Yet, what will happen next?

This “Neutral Zone” as Bridges calls it is a grand opportunity to take an assessment. What have we been through? What did we learn? What will we change? How can we benefit and be blessed from this life transition? How will it help to remake us?

Part of the value of Ezekiel’s vision is that he was right smack dab in the middle of the valley of dry bones. He was face to face with the hard time. And it was through that reality that the bones began to be connected, bone to bone; sinews strung together; flesh covering the body and new bodies were created. They had all the moving parts. They were new bodies.

Yet they were not alive. They were going through the motions. They were not living. In verse 9, Ezekiel prophesized to these bones and the bodies declaring, “Thus says the Lord: come from the four winds O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.”

They lived, stood up on their feet and were an exceedingly great host.

Reminds me of Genesis 2:7: “And God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.”

God breathed life into Adam. God breathed life into dry bones. God breathes into every one of us - - and that is when we start to live and rise up!

Yet that breath of God is nothing more than wind blowing if we cannot surrender accepting it. Nothing but the winds blowing about. Nothing but the breeze around us.

Whoever is about to receive that breath; whoever is willing to yield to God’s Spirit; whoever has faced these transitions in life realizing they are a blessing and not a curse knows God and God dwells within.

Acts 2 is a similar event focusing on Pentecost. Where people from 13 different countries could understand one another even speaking in their own language. They were willing to yield to God’s Spirit and the church was born!

That’s God. That’s how God operates. That is the miracle of Almighty God.

He never leaves us but goes with us into the valley of our dry bones and embraces that reality with us. Goes with us in the house with all these different nationalities and makes sense of it. Is present with us today in our own time of transition...to show us a still more excellent way.

That’s the joy and exhilaration of God’s Spirit. Ever alive. Ever changing. Ever molding us into God’s image. For as Ezekiel declares, “Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord”

Praise be to God