

These Bones Will Live

The Day of Pentecost, Year B
May 19, 2024

Planning Notes

Do you ever feel like planning for Pentecost is like planning a birthday party? This momentous day is almost here, and you find yourself rushing around, collecting all of the bright colored streamers and tablecloths, curating the best party playlist, and wracking your brain for how to make this one day extra special. We create this joyous, celebratory, meaningful gathering to celebrate a day that, in actuality, was chaotic and probably at least a bit terrifying (not unlike actual births).

How fitting, then, that this year we find [Acts 2](#) paired with [Ezekiel 37](#), a passage with all the makings of a ghost story. Dry bones littered across a valley that come back to life like reverse zombies. I'd say that counts as chaotic and a bit terrifying! I'm not suggesting we craft worship like an episode of the *Walking Dead*, yet the pairing of Acts 2 and Ezekiel 37 invites us to help people encounter Pentecost anew, to recognize the work of the Spirit in places that look like graveyards, and to follow the Spirit into spaces we presumed are full of death to prophesy life, well-being, and flourishing.

The beauty of these two texts is that they offer so many opportunities for visceral connections with the stories. Fill the altar with textures that are dry and rough next to symbols for life and flourishing. Fill the space with layers of sound and languages and song that proclaim the work of the Spirit in our midst. You might even find a way to incorporate a little holy cacophony! Engage your musicians in the process of enlivening one or both texts. Perhaps you have a percussionist who accompanies the dry bones rising to life. Or perhaps your pianist might give sound to the wind and fire and proclamation in Acts 2. Get creative and involve as many people as you can. If this is the Church's birthday, then the whole of the gathered body should be involved in telling, remembering, and living the story of who we are in the Spirit.

However you approach worship on this day, remember that it's all about *living now*. We are not just rehearsing a story from the past—we are embodying the story of the life we have in Christ with one another *now*. So don't be afraid to name the difficulties your community is facing. Be honest about personal struggles in your midst. Lament if you need to. Name the areas where your bones feel dry. Confess and repent. This, too, is part of the story of Pentecost. The question is: Will we join in and trust the Spirit to take what seems lifeless and breathe abundant life into being?

Preaching Notes

[Ezekiel 37:1-14](#) | [Acts 2:1-21](#)

Pentecost, though only one date on our calendars, represents one of the most powerful movements of the Holy Spirit in Christian history. When we lead our congregations through the remembrance and celebration of this day, we have the privilege of interpreting some of scripture's most captivating narratives and powerful imagery. As I have commented before on the occasion of the Transfiguration, we would be hard-pressed as preachers to find analogies that perfectly convey the splendor and significance of these stories from scripture. However, I think the slow plot development of Ezekiel, chapter 37, provides a wide-open invitation to find ourselves within it. If you choose to lead with the Acts narrative of the first Christian Pentecost, then the bold and prophetic hopefulness of Peter and the early church will surely have something to offer your hearers, too.

What our team most wishes to highlight in this week's worship resources is the interrogative setup for God's words to Ezekiel, "Will these bones live?" This question is precisely our point of entry into Ezekiel's story. Who among us has not asked such a question before? In Ezekiel's story, the bones are 'the whole house of Israel.' In our story, perhaps they are the church universal, our denomination, or contemporary corporations and governments. The question is worth asking of all institutions and systems: Will the bones live? I can imagine the church of Acts, chapter 2, was asking that question of its rag-tag group, as well, and it is into this pandemonium that God brought about the most marvelous manifestation of the Spirit's power in our history. Are we bold enough to ask the question today? I am bold enough to hope that we cannot even dream of what is yet to come. If you or your congregants need some encouragement to answer God's question, remember the time-honored sports wisdom: "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take." We cannot begin to understand the hope God has for us if we don't ask the question.

In May 2021, my father invited me to relieve him of preaching duties on the Day of Pentecost. I thought that was a bold exercise of trust for an enthusiastic first-year seminary survivor. A plethora of current events made it all too easy to identify with the desperate Israelite exiles from Ezekiel or the post-resurrection Jesus followers from John, chapter 20, who cowered behind locked doors. With one semester of preaching training and some rudimentary biblical studies knowledge to boot, I paid close attention to the classic three-step progression of Ezekiel's oracles and asked the congregation where we found ourselves. Notice in Ezekiel's story that God instructs him to prophesy three times: first to the bones, then to the assembled skeletons, and then to the breath that will enliven them. Where do you and your congregation identify yourselves? In May 2021, my congregational exegesis showed me that we were inanimate skeletons waiting to get our breath back. I equated breath with a sense of humor and invited the congregation to dream of a day when the heaviness of the pandemic, post-election polarization, and contentious social conflict would be lifted, and we might feel liberated to laugh again.

Here in 2024, does finding your identity in the inanimate skeletons still work for you and your hearers? Notice that the skeletons waiting for their breath have already been told who they are and whose they are; they just need the Spirit to give them life. Are we still there and no further along? Did we miss the spiritual gift of life after lockdown? What if our churches, in the wake of disaffiliation pulling us in every

direction, feel like we have actually regressed? Do we need a reminder of the foundational hope that our bones can be joined together to become something more? Are we a skeleton of a church that needs to be reanimated by our mission and gospel? This material was prepared months ahead of the United Methodist General Conference 2024; you have the benefit of knowing how those proceedings came to pass. Where are we now? You, our readers, know best. No matter where you and your congregation find yourselves, our team holds that our answer to God's question is essential for the survival and the future of the church: 'Will these bones live?'

A similar question can certainly be posed to the early church. As far as the casual observer knew, all the liveliness and passion of the church rested with its founder, who had taught some wonderful things and amassed a following, subjected himself to the authorities, endured a brutal death, and conquered death by being resurrected, only to ascend into Heaven and seemingly abandon his followers. Could those bones outlive Jesus' ascension? Only if they are enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Paul would go on to write elsewhere that the Spirit is God's downpayment on the promises that Christ lived, died, and was raised for (2 Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:14). The early church needed some sort of theological collateral to prove to them that the bones of Christ's body could live. Thankfully for them, God delivered in a marvelous way. The gospel was proclaimed in many languages; the apostles would go on to work signs of healing and raise the dead; the church would miraculously receive recognition from some of its fiercest opponents, and the good news of God's promised Messiah would be taken even to the Gentiles. Peter and his friends could hardly have asked for anything more.

So I ask you again, "Are we the church bold enough to prophesy life into the bones we face?" I hope you won't just answer that question yourself but invite your congregants to be prophets, too. I will lead by example and say again that I am bold enough to declare that we cannot even begin to imagine the best of what God has stored up for God's people. If the tongues and the signs and salvation to the Gentiles are just the downpayment, then I cannot wait for the final installment!

Liturgical Resources

Call to Worship

Beloved of God, pay attention. Did you notice? There are dry bones all around us. In our neighborhoods, our workplaces, our schools, our community and nation and world. They pop up wherever people are parched for love and dignity, provision and flourishing. We notice them, and we wonder:

Will these bones live?

Pay attention. Can you hear it? So many of us carry dry bones that clank around in our hearts. Dreams that are dying. Gifts that are languishing. Hopes left undernourished and neglected. Loneliness that eats away at our sense of connection with one another until we wonder:

Can these bones live?

Pay attention. Can you feel it? The Holy Spirit breathes among us. Breathe in love. Breathe in provision. Breathe in connection and flourishing. Because the Spirit never quits breathing among us, assuring us:

These bones will live.

Pay attention. Can you sense it? God is always putting us back together. In dreams of abundance and visions of cooperation, in the cacophony of voices who share and receive the good news in their own languages, the Spirit revives us and restores us, reminding us:

These bones live, because Love dwells among us, now and always. Thanks be to God!

Prayer for the Day

Send forth your Spirit, O God, and renew the face of the earth. Dwell among us, even though your presence will startle and unsettle us. Grant us your peace, we pray, as justice and love pour down upon the yearning earth. Amen.

Written by Mary Sue Gast in *Touch Holiness: Resources for Worship, Updated*, ed. Ruth C. Duck and Maren C. Tirabassi (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2012), 105.

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Prayer of Confession

We do not stop enough to listen to the still-speaking God.
And like the people of Jerusalem long ago,
we often misunderstand the Spirit's movement among us.
In the silence and stillness of this moment,
let us draw near to God and listen.

[*silence*]

Let us confess together:

**We confess to you, Renewing Spirit,
that we confuse unity with uniformity,
and diversity with divisiveness.
We speak and behave as if being a part of your family
means assimilating others to our way of living.
We deny and destroy the beauty you created in each person.
We long to change these patterns, O Creator,
but we do not know how.
Teach us to value challenge.
Help us to see strength in difference.
And empower us to build your kingdom in creativity and love. Amen.**

Hear the good news!
God's Spirit has been poured out upon all flesh,
and we have been made one.
We are no longer scattered or divided,
but gathered together to build up the kingdom on this earth.
Thanks be to God!

Written by Rev. Mary Nelson Abbott in *Come, Let Us Build*. Posted on the United Church of Christ's **Worship Ways Archive**, <http://www.ucc.org/worship/worship-ways/year-c/p/pentecost-sunday.html>. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2013/04/pentecost-confession.html>.

Benediction

Go out into the world,
and labour to bring forth new life.
Dream dreams, pursue visions
and speak of God's goodness
in the words of those who would hear.

And may the God who breathed life into creation be your delight.
May Christ Jesus give hope to your dreaming,
and may the Holy Spirit, your advocate and supporter,
.....set your hearts ablaze with a passion for peace.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
...In the name of Christ. Amen.

Written by Nathan Nettleton. Copyright © 2003. Posted at LaughingBird.net. Re-posted on the re:Worship blog at <https://re-worship.blogspot.com/2012/04/pentecost-benediction.html>.