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The Day of Pentecost

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Through the Church Jesus Sends His Spirit to the World

Before his ascension Jesus promised his followers that he would send the Holy Spirit to empower them and empower their message. Fifty days after Easter, on the Day of Pentecost, Jesus did just that. With flames of fire and a mighty wind Jesus bestowed on his Church the blessings of the Spirit. The Pentecostal power remains ours today. The Spirit enlivens us to ministry and gives life to our message.

First Reading **Ezekiel 37:1-14**
The Spirit gives life to those who are dead.

Second Reading **Acts 2:1-21**
The Spirit comes on Pentecost and the message of Christ is proclaimed.

Gospel **John 15:26-27; 16:4-11**
Jesus promises to send the Holy Spirit.

Sermon **Ezekiel 37:1-14**
Breath Gives Life to Bones

Introduction: Ezekiel was a prophet in the Old Testament. Bible believers have always considered Ezekiel to be one of the four major prophets along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Daniel. People call Ezekiel a major prophet because of what he wrote and because of how much he wrote. Ezekiel lived at a time in history when King David's great kingdom was falling apart and coming to an end. The Babylonians annihilated the Judean army and led 10,000 Jewish citizens into exile in Babylon. Ezekiel was one of those exiles. His mission was to assess the situation for what it was and then look into the future for what it would be.

The First Reading for today is a message Ezekiel shared with the other exiles, and the message absolutely stunned them. The news arrived that the Babylonians had attacked the city of Jerusalem again and this time burned the city and the temple down. Their monarchy was gone, their priesthood was gone, their way of worship was gone. The report couldn't have been worse. The Lord commented on this tragedy in a vision he gave to Ezekiel and it's one of the most vivid pictures in the entire Bible: **The hand of the LORD was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the LORD and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry.** The picture was devastating.

Apparently, the picture was also inspiring. It was so inspiring that it moved James and John Johnson in 1928 to create the great civil rights song, "Dem Bones, Dem Bones, Dem Dry Bones." You've all heard it: "Toe bone connected to the foot bone, foot bone connected to the heel bone, heel bone connected to the ankle bone" all the way up to "neck bone connected to the head bone. Now hear the word of the Lord."

The truth that inspired the Johnson brothers in 1928 is the exact same truth that has attached Ezekiel's vision to the Day of Pentecost for so many centuries. The vision of the dry bones is really a message of deliverance and that's why it's so popular with people, especially people who feel oppressed and enslaved. But the vision is so much more than a vision of freedom from exile or freedom from slavery. It's a vision that explains to us how the Lord sends his Holy Spirit to raise the human race out of the death of sin and unbelief. In this vision we see the mighty breath of the Spirit breathe faith into the hearts of people. On Pentecost the Spirit came with a mighty wind. With Ezekiel the Spirit came with the breath of life. On Pentecost and in Ezekiel—and this is the truth for today:

Breath Gives Life to Bones

1. The news that Jerusalem had been destroyed just took the breath away from these exiles. If our church burned down we could go to another church. If the preacher died, you could find another one. Not these exiles. Without their temple the exiles collapsed like a pile of dry bones. With the monarchy abolished, there would be no army to bring them back from exile. They were stuck. The Lord instructed Ezekiel to make it clear: **Son of man, these bones are the people of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off."** Exactly.

But the exile of the nation of Israel was always more than a promised land and a nation called Babylon. Whenever the prophets spoke about Israel's physical exiles, they were also talking about Israel's spiritual exiles. Whether they were slaves in Egypt or exiles in Babylon or even when they were free citizens living in their own land, the people of Israel were regularly a mile away from God—and they were the ones who were drifting away. It was like rebellion against God was in their DNA. Sometimes God threatened them, sometimes he pleaded with them. But for most of them, their response was like a valley of dry bones: all dust and death.

When Peter stood up on Pentecost, he was seeing the same scene. When he spoke to the **Parthians, Medes, and Elamites and the residents of Mesopotamia**—well, you heard the list of nations in Acts—he was speaking to dry bones scattered all over the city. These were people who were in Jerusalem to celebrate the grain harvest, but for most of them, the great festival wasn't anything more than religious patriotism. They didn't see the spiritual truths God wanted to teach them. They were religious, but they were not believers. The God they worshiped was a god they invented, a god who would reward them for a life of obedience. For them, Jesus was not the Messiah God sent to save them. Peter hit them where it hurt. **Jesus was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.** They were like bones: dry as dust and they were doomed to death.

No dry bones here, right? We're all alive in Christ, flesh and blood, head and heart, body and soul, all joined to Jesus. But could it be that we Lutherans have been so close to Jesus for so long that we've kind of forgotten just how dry and dead we would be without him? We forget, I think, where and what we would be if our parents hadn't brought us to baptism or led us to church or sent us to Sunday School. I wonder if we don't overlook the sinful self that still lives in us and leads us to sin every day. I wonder sometimes if we come to church more out of loyalty or obligation or habit or friendship than with a craving to hear the Word and receive the sacrament. I have to force myself to look at the dust of dry bones that sticks to me and lies on me and you have to do the same. The exiles saw the dry bones in themselves and we have to do the same.

2. So what happened with the dry bones? **The Lord asked me, Son of man, can these bones live?" I said, "Sovereign LORD, you alone know." Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the LORD.**

There was life for the dry bones after all and there was hope for the exiles. God was not going to forsake them in Babylon. After 70 years God brought them back to Israel. They rebuilt Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. They restored the sacrifices and the nation was at peace. God says it here: **This is what the Sovereign LORD says: My people, I am**

going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land.

Ezekiel heard the sound: **There was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together. Bone to bone.** Ezekiel saw the vision. And from what he heard and saw he could see that the Lord was about to begin his great New Testament task that would reach beyond Babylon and Jerusalem to the world. **The Lord said, Prophecy to the breath, Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live. So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.** The Spirit worked slowly but surely. The Spirit came first to Jesus' followers with fire and wind. The Spirit came next to 3,000 and worked in them a desire to be baptized. The Spirit came next to Corinthians and Galatians and Colossians. The Spirit came next to Europeans and then to Americans. And the Spirit came next to you and to me and he breathed in us with the power of his Word and he turned our dry bones into living, breathing faith and he rested our faith on Jesus Christ who lived and died and rose again so that we might live with God now and forever. Exactly as Jesus promised: **When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father—he will testify about me.** A student once asked me. "Why do we have so many days to talk about Jesus but only Pentecost to talk about the Holy Spirit?" I answered with a smile: "The Holy Spirit is at work every day as he works in us to believe in Jesus."

In a very real way Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones was fulfilled on Pentecost. On Pentecost the Spirit came to the Church to enliven faith and ministry. The Spirit is still at work in his Word and sacraments; the vision is still in sight and Pentecost is still happening. But I want you to look out now, out of your windows, out of your cars, out of your backyards and I want you to see the valleys around where you live and I want you to see that they are full of bones that are very dry. You and I are the Ezekiel's for our neighbors and our families and our friends. We proclaim the message of hope for exiles and freedom for slaves and life for the dead. We are the prophets of this age, we pray for the Spirit to work, we call on him to breathe his power into people. And as the Spirit works, we will see indeed that **breath gives life to bones.** Amen.

Pastor James Tiefel