

Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Romans 8:22-27  
May 19, 2024

## Life to Life

Today is Pentecost. It represents for the Christian faith the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was at the harvest festival of the winter wheat, fifty days after Passover, that the Holy Spirit came and enlivened the gathering of believers. There was a miracle of speech.

In terms of the church worship year, from now until Advent in late fall is the time after Pentecost, or life in the Spirit. It refers us not to some heightened state of spirituality, but to all the concerns of earthly life that compete for our attention as we seek to live faithfully;

concerns birth and death, and all that lies in between; about family and relationships, about health, money; concerns about vocation and citizenship, which are about relationships in the context of the larger groups of which we are a part, about how to be present to God in all we do, no matter how mundane.

For God is present to us. We are indwelt by the Spirit. The idea of spirit means “breath, wind,” the source of whatever it is that brings us to life and makes us living beings. To the ancients it had a mysterious quality. Even with all the scientific explanations to help us, it retains its mystery.

The Spirit is more than a physical thing. It stands for the even more mysterious quality of life that runs beyond anything material. The best window into the

understanding of the spiritual life is the context of relationships.

In this context we learn about realities that are not physical at all; hatred and anger, selfishness and greed, fear and anxiety, all on one hand. And on the other; friendship and love, compassion and empathy, goodness and mercy, to name a few. As literal air fills our bodies to make them alive, the Spirit fills our souls, giving *life* to life.

We have also heard one of the most significant passages in all the writings of St. Paul, as he talks about life as groaning like in the pains of childbirth, life as waiting eagerly for adoption, not really knowing what we ought to pray for, and about how the Spirit helps us, searching our hearts when we can find no words, interceding on our behalf. Ushering us into the realm of the divine. Today is Pentecost.

It is also Youth Sunday. We consider the journey from youth to maturity. One of the truths about being young is that one’s physical capabilities are approaching their highest reach. The long slow decline has already begun. Hear these words as to the young person in all of us that never really goes away or grows old even when the strength begins to fade.

Without a childlike youthfulness life is listless and uninspiring, dry. When we have no maturity, life is a chaos that bounces from one thing to another, with little connection or sense of order or meaning.

Part of what the spiritual life is about is moving from the one to the other in a healthy way, without losing the youthful heart, it I may put it that way, or failing to attain the greater sense of life's meaning associated with maturity.

The image of Dry Bones comes from a scene in the the Book of Ezekiel, and is also associated with the Spirit. More than any other prophet, with the possible exception of Jeremiah, Ezekiel is associated with the dark times of the Babylonian Exile, the time after both of Israel's kingdoms had been conquered.

There was economic and political collapse and military defeat, and exile for some, impoverishment for many, and humiliation for everyone. One can imagine what the image of a Valley of Dry Bones meant to them. Life was a desert, there were skeletons all around.

The vision of the dry bones is a gift to bring Ezekiel hope in what was otherwise a hopeless situation . . . he sees the valley where the dead have fallen and their bodies have rotted away and there is nothing left but the skeletons. And the question is put to him, "Can these bones live?"

Let us listen again to excerpts from this reading:

"Prophecy 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 . . .'"

The text continues as the prophet, in the middle of his vision, obeys the command he has been given; "and as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together bone-to-bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath," there was no filling of the Spirit.

And then, very interestingly, the Lord told him to, "prophecy to the breath . . . and say to it . . . 'come from the four winds . . . and breathe into these slain, *that they may live*'"

It has always been my belief that the story of Israel is not told for its own sake, but because it is the story of the human race, of all of us. The Lord raised up a people of hope *from a people who had no hope*, a people of life, filled with the Spirit, *from a dead people who had no spirit in them*; a people of faithfulness *from a people who had no faith*, even, dare it say, a righteous people, *from an unrighteous people*. That is what this day is about. Pentecost, Youth Sunday, Dry Bones.

Are there suggestions for living, things we might tell our young selves and by telling our young selves remind our older selves too, who are yet on the journey? I offer three.

The first is to be grounded in reality. I mean by this, live one's life in the context of the time and place and circumstances you have been given. We live in the modern period, characterized by industry and

technology and science; we live in the time after the big wars of the 20th century, the age of holocaust and nuclear weapons, global transportation and trade, pandemics, computers and artificial intelligence. We also consider the endless ways our individual lives have come to us.

There are multiple ways to approach life in the world. One can embrace it uncritically, as if it is all good, refusing to see its shortcomings and to be unaware of its dire problems. Or one can reject it all, move to the wilderness somewhere, and live off the land, away from people and civilization. In-between, where most of us reside, lies all kinds of partial acceptances and rejections, affirmations and condemnations. Make your place in *this* world because it is the real one. Live a life of discernment.

The second goes along with it, which is to be humble. From the start, no matter if you are the best and brightest of your generation, acknowledge that you have little control over anything, even your own life. Don't be too sure of your knowledge, be open-minded, always listen, never assume your way is best. None of us gave life to the valley with the skeletons, nor with tongues of fire enlivened the believers with spiritual vitality.

Have faith. Even when we find ourselves in unsettling situations of pain, confusion and powerlessness, never forget that all this religiosity or lack of it is not relevant. Faith is relevant. Trust.

Trust in the one who made the bones come to life and made the believers speak like they were drunk early in the day; the one who inhabits space and time, and eternity, as well as every living thing, making it all breath in and out and filling it up with whatever it is that takes us beyond the machine-like working of our bodies to the glorious abundance of life in relationship; to God, the source of life, creator, redeemer, sustainer of life and faith revealed in Jesus Christ, and to each other and the world in all its vast array.

And pay attention, the bones begin to stir, the tongues of fire flame up giving life to life.

## Ehud

12 Again the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord, and because they did this evil the Lord gave Eglon king of Moab power over Israel. 13 Getting the Ammonites and Amalekites to join him, Eglon came and attacked Israel, and they took possession of the City of Palms. 14 The Israelites were subject to Eglon king of Moab for eighteen years.

15 Again the Israelites cried out to the Lord, and he gave them a deliverer—Ehud, a left-handed man, the son of Gera the Benjamite. The Israelites sent him with tribute to Eglon king of Moab. 16 Now Ehud had made a double-edged sword about a cubit long, which he strapped to his right thigh under his clothing. 17 He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab, who was a very fat man. 18 After Ehud had presented the tribute, he sent on their way those who had carried it. 19 But on reaching the stone images near Gilgal he himself went back to Eglon and said, “Your Majesty, I have a secret message for you.”

The king said to his attendants, “Leave us!” And they all left.

20 Ehud then approached him while he was sitting alone in the upper room of his palace and said, “I have a message from God for you.” As the king rose from his seat, 21 Ehud reached with his left hand, drew the sword from his right thigh and plunged it into the king’s belly. 22 Even the handle sank in after the blade, and his bowels discharged. Ehud did not pull the sword out, and the fat closed in over it. 23 Then Ehud went out to the porch; he shut the doors of the upper room behind him and locked them.

24 After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, “He must be relieving himself in the inner room of the palace.” 25 They waited to the point of embarrassment, but when he did not open the doors of the room, they took a key and unlocked them. There they saw their lord fallen to the floor, dead. 26 While they waited, Ehud got away. He passed by the stone images and escaped to Seirah. 27 When he arrived there, he blew a trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites went down with him from the hills, with him leading them.

28 “Follow me,” he ordered, “for the Lord has given Moab, your enemy, into your hands.” So they followed him down and took possession of the fords of the Jordan that led to Moab; they allowed no one to cross over. 29 At that time they struck down about ten thousand Moabites, all vigorous and strong; not one escaped. 30 That day Moab was made subject to Israel, and the land had peace for eighty years.

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