

**The First Reading is from Psalm 104:24-34, 35b**

<sup>24</sup> O LORD, how manifold are your works!

In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.

<sup>25</sup> Yonder is the sea, great and wide,  
creeping things innumerable are there,  
living things both small and great.

<sup>26</sup> There go the ships,  
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.

<sup>27</sup> These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;

<sup>28</sup> when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

<sup>29</sup> When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.

<sup>30</sup> When you send forth your spirit,<sup>[a]</sup> they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.

<sup>31</sup> May the glory of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works—

<sup>32</sup> who looks on the earth and it trembles,  
who touches the mountains and they smoke.

<sup>33</sup> 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> May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the LORD.

<sup>35b</sup> Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Praise the LORD!

**The Second Reading is from Ezekiel 37:1-14**

37 The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. <sup>2</sup> He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup> He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." <sup>4</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. <sup>5</sup> Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup> I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

<sup>7</sup> So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. <sup>8</sup> I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. <sup>9</sup> Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." <sup>10</sup> I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

<sup>11</sup> Then he said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.' <sup>12</sup> Therefore prophecy, and say to them, thus, says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. <sup>13</sup> And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. <sup>14</sup> I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act, says the LORD."

### **The Message: Can These Bones Live?**

Thursday morning, I led our first Pentecost Season Sunrise Lectio Divina. I used selected verses from our passage this morning, choosing Eugene Peterson's translation, *The Message*. The phrase that caught my attention on Thursday morning was "set me down." We heard this phrase in the translation that was read this morning, too. "Set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of dry bones." After being grabbed by God, Ezekiel found himself "in the middle of an open plain strewn with bones." These words "set me down" were a reminder of how important it is for me, and I would add for us to stop and listen for God's voice.

Our psalm embodies this reminder for me, as the psalmist recounts with joy, "O Lord, how manifold are your works! Praise the Lord!" I believe the psalmist was able to pen these words because he stopped and listened. Given the imagery of the psalm, I imagine the psalmist perched near the shoreline of the Mediterranean Sea, so that he is able to view the vast blue green ocean. Through sight and imagination, the psalmist saw sea creatures great and small, and passing ships as well. The psalmist must have paused long enough to reflect, as thanksgiving welled up within him, as he remembered that the very breath of life was a gift from God. Something within the psalmist comes alive, as his words are filled with energy, "I will sing to the Lord as long as I live; I will sing to my God while I have being, for I rejoice in the Lord. Praise the Lord!" I don't know about you, but I can feel the psalmist's aliveness. There is energy in the psalmist's words that I am sure led to renewal in the midst of the chaos of life.

This phrase "set me down" has implications for all of us given the frenetic pace of the world around us. The headlines as well as the demands in our own lives often overwhelm us. Bombarded with more than we can take in or comprehend, hope sometimes becomes elusive as yet another school shooting took place in Texas, which claimed ten lives. My heart broke for the families, but especially for the Pakistani exchange student's family given that I was once an exchange student. Despair overwhelms as we try to imagine the family of six that bombed three churches in Indonesia last Sunday, claiming 13 lives. How does a dad and mom enlist their children in such a horrendous act of violence? What ideology takes the sanctity of life and turns it upside down and inside out? Resignation takes hold as the possibility of peace seems out of reach for Palestine and Israel, as even more lives were claimed last week amidst the protests

sparked by our own embassy move. Hopelessness takes root as violence continues to spill into our neighborhoods, as retailers close more stores and the unemployment line lengthens, and as people struggle to make sense of our 24/7 wired world yet feel evermore lonely. "Set us down," O Lord and connect us to what makes the psalmist and the valley of dry bones come alive.

You see, our passage this morning from Ezekiel isn't so much about resurrection, as it is about restoration. This vision of a valley of dry bones is not Ezekiel's first. Listen to his first, "When I was thirty years of age, I was living with the exiles on the Kebar River. On the fifth day of the fourth month, the sky opened and I saw visions of God...within the fire were what looked like four creatures vibrant with life...I saw something that looked like a wheel on the ground...over the heads of the living creatures was something like a dome." Ezekiel fell to his knees with his face to the ground and then God said, "Son of man, stand up! I have something to say to you!" Yes, God has something to say to us today, yet are we ready to listen?

The valley of dry sun-bleached bones symbolizes the hopelessness of the exiled people of God. The reality of their refugee status with no place to call home was crushing them. The grandeur of their Jerusalem Temple was but a pile of rubble. Their land, their temple, and their king were all gone. Everything that symbolized God's promise had been lost. Is it any wonder that a battlefield full of bones, dry sun-bleached bones were used to describe the hopelessness of the people of God?

This Pentecost, maybe you feel like a pile of dry sun-bleached bones. Maybe we, as a church, feel like a pile of dry sun-bleached bones. Whether it is the headlines, your own life or the reality of the world that surrounds us that connects us to this text, I am sure we can all relate to experiences of despair or resignation or hopelessness. I am sure some of us know the reality of what exile feels like, to be in a land not our own, whether by choice or by circumstances. Feelings of exile happen whenever what is normal is no more.

In the midst of exile, it is hard to imagine restoration. Just read the Book of Lamentations, which chronicles the despair of God's people in exile. When devastation is the only field of vision before us, restoration seems impossible.

"Set me down," I heard the Spirit say this past Thursday morning. Set us down, as a church, Lord. Set us down and help us to trust in your presence, which is as close as our breath. Help us to just breathe. Help us to recognize the preciousness of being able to breathe. Yes, breathe. Take a long deep breath and exhale it slowly. Take another long deep breath giving thanks for this gift we often take for granted. Unless you are a trained athlete, most of us can only last a couple of minutes without another breath. Even trained athletes can only last 7 or 8 minutes without another breath. Yet, you and I rarely take notice of our breath or breathe with intention. So, take a moment and notice this gift, for as the psalmist says without breath we die.

"Rauch" is the Hebrew word for breath found in this psalm. This Hebrew word can be translated as breath or spirit or wind. "Rauch" occurs eight times in the first ten verses of our Ezekiel passage and then again in verse 14. This should signal to us its importance to God's people, for this "rauch" makes us come alive. This "rauch" is the unifying force that leads to life. The spirit of God is what will animate the valley of dry bones and each one of us.

Ezekiel was set down in the middle of a valley of very dry bones devoid of "rauch." So, when God said to Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel's answer shouldn't surprise us. Ezekiel defers to God, saying, "Only you know that."

Ezekiel knows that no amount of effort on his own part will bring these bones to life. Even CPR won't work. I wonder if we know this truth, given the culture in which we are immersed, which tells us to just do it! We are schooled to believe that our effort alone can make things happen. Individually or as a church, all we need to do is to work harder or maybe just a bit smarter to bring dry bones to life. Yet, Ezekiel is wise enough to know that without God these bones will never live again.

What happens next in our text is startling, for God says to Ezekiel, "Prophecy over these bones!" Ezekiel knows that only God knows. Ezekiel knows that only God has the power to make these bones live. Yet, God doesn't just do it! God doesn't just bring the dry bones to life. No, God doesn't do it. God enlists Ezekiel. The work of restoration is a partnership.

God calls each and every one of us to participate in the work of restoration, of restoring hope to the forlorn, love to the hardened heart, joy to the despondent, renewed commitment to the apathetic. As one participant on Thursday said God's command is both thrilling and terrifying! God wants me? Yeah and Yikes! God wants all of us as a church? Awesome and oh no!

God is fully capable without us, yet God chooses to enlist us - our time, talents and treasures - in the work of restoring life in the midst of all hopelessness. God instructs Ezekiel and then Ezekiel prophesizes just as God commanded him. Not once, but twice. This partnership happens in relationship, for God has something to say to us today, yet are we ready to listen?

God had something to say to an 18-member Presbyterian Church in a small town through a member who was an avid bicyclist who said, "Hey, what if we have a community bicycle fix up day?" The 18-member congregation embraced the idea and the Spirit went to work through them. Another member of the congregation offered space in his downtown auto repair shop. Those who couldn't work on bikes helped prepare and serve cookies, brownies, lemonade and chili to the workers and the community. The local police department was enlisted and they conducted bicycle safety classes. ProRider provided bicycle helmets at a 75% discount to the church so that they could give the helmets away to kids who attended the fix-up day. The entire cost of the event was \$600 and it was funded through a trust given to the church years ago designated to bless children. The Spirit of God partnered with this congregation to meet a need in their town - struggling families and single parents with young children who had bicycles that needed repair.

God had something to say to a church that no longer had enough children to run a traditional vacation bible school, for someone in the congregation said, "Why don't we take vacation bible school to the assisted living facility across the street from our church?" The Spirit was at work, for the assisted living facility was thrilled with the prospect of young children partnering with seniors for activities. The vacation bible school curriculum was modified and crafts were adjusted to be intergenerational. For a week the assisted living facility enjoyed the vibrant energy of young children and adult helpers through music and crafts, stories and prayers. Yet, something more happened as well. The participating children adopted seniors as their VBS grandparents, not just for the week but throughout the year. The Spirit of God partnered with this congregation to meet a community need that was literally across the street.

"God told the dry bones, 'Watch this: I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin. And breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!'"

This church has recently been introduced to Thrive Single Moms and I must say that Brandi Dailey, the single mom that birthed this non-profit has come alive and realized that God is God. As a single mom, she is clear that her own effort is not going to be enough. So, she has partnered with the Spirit of God and rattled the bones of your Outreach Committee. As a church we recently supported Thrive Single Moms through a financial donation and by hosting a mentor training session. You will hear more about this organization as our partnership unfolds.

“O mortal, can these bones live?” I wonder if we are we ready to come alive? Are we willing to partner with the Spirit of God even if it terrifies us? Are we willing to meet a community need that will stretch and challenge us?

This Pentecost, I am certain of one thing as your pastor. Unless we are willing to partner with the Spirit of God, we will most certainly die. We cannot grow this church or meet a community need through our own effort. These will only happen as we partner with the Spirit of God. We, as a church, are to do so, even at the risk of losing our life. God didn't breathe life into the First Presbyterian Church, so that we could just take care of ourselves. God breathed life into us so that would be a community of hope, love and witness to the community in which we reside.

Are we ready to come alive? May the Spirit of God thrill us with possibilities, even if we are terrified, as we risk meeting community needs! Amen.