

A Dry Wind
Ezekiel 37:1-14
May 31, 2009—1st Service only

A woman who “enjoyed her religion” visited a very traditional and formal church one Sunday. “Amen” she said, as the minister brought out a point with which she agreed.

“Madam” whispered an usher standing nearby. “Please try and restrain yourself. We don’t allow that in this church.”

In a few moments she was so carried away by the sermon that she shouted, “Amen. Praise the Lord. Hallelujah!”

The usher rushed to her side, “Madam, you must quiet down immediately or we’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“I didn’t mean to disturb...but I am just so happy since I found the Lord,” she explained.

“You may have found the Lord,” retorted the usher severely, “but I’m quite sure you didn’t find him here!”

Ouch! That usher certainly didn’t think about what he was saying! In fact, I wouldn’t call him an usher—I’d call him a “husher” and I’m sure over the years you’ve known a few church “hushers.”

To be honest, that woman in the story would probably have felt more at home in a so-called “spirit-filled” worship service. Church insiders know that when you describe a congregation as “spirit-filled” it means that rather than a quiet, contemplative, reverent worship experience, there is usually clapping and dialoguing with the pastor and loud percussive music. Some congregations that are “spirit-filled” speak in tongues. Others have moments where members are “slain in the spirit”—literally

fainting with an overwhelming sense that the Spirit has overcome them physically.

There used to be quite a divide between spirit-filled and traditional churches, but over the last 20-30 years or so, with the rise of the contemporary worship, those distinctions are melding more together.

Still, I have a problem with the way we categorize different churches. The Holy Spirit was never intended to be wed to a definition of worship style. The Holy Spirit is that presence, that intangible life-giving force, which revives the souls of believers. It is something that is blowing through our world and through our lives bringing wholeness and new life.

- Some would say it was the Holy Spirit who came to Elijah as a still, small voice while he was recuperating in a desert mountain cave after his battle with the priests of Baal.
- Jesus, in Chapter 15 of the gospel of John, called the spirit The Counselor, who would come after him and guide the disciples after he was gone.
- And in the second chapter of Acts, we hear that this promise was fulfilled when a rushing sound of wind was heard by all those who were visiting the temple that day as they observed what we now call the day of Pentecost. It was the effects of that Spirit that gave them renewed vigor and courage for their calling. It was the effects of that Spirit that broke down the language barriers that had been erected since the days of the Tower of Babel.

I'm even going to take a hermeneutical stance here and say it was the Holy Spirit who came to Ezekiel in the vision which was our scripture this morning. Again, if you've grown up in the church, you've come to know it as the story of the Valley of Dry Bones.

Dry bones.

The very words conjure so many images.

Many of you might think that's the type of thing I saw regularly during my 14+ year sojourn in the desert of Arizona—the bones of cattle, bleached white by the relentless sun, strewn across the wide expanse of nothing-but-cacti, as portrayed in many a western.

Dry bones.

Some of you may think of that after a recent trip to your doctor for a bone density test, checking to see if your bones were too thin and dry and easily breakable. Osteoporosis—not a good thing.

Or maybe some of you came to church today “bone tired,” weary beyond belief because of the worries you’ve been carrying, the fears you’ve been fighting. You feel your spirit is encased in a bag of dry bones.

Ezekiel was prophet to a whole community that was feeling dry bone despair. It was about 580 years before the birth of Christ—many long years before God’s incarnate walk on earth.

The world had turned upside down for the people of Judah. Their government, weakened by years of corruption, was unable to fight off the conquering might of Babylon.

The people were taken from their homes and marched across national boundaries to the capital of Babylonia. Jewish poets wrote of that time, “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.”

Perhaps more importantly—their temple had been destroyed—the place where they met with God, felt God’s presence, heard God’s voice.

Without the temple, they felt torn from their God—distant from the One who gave them life and purpose and protection. They were far away from the Living Water that had sustained them for so long.

“The forces of death had overwhelmed her, and now her exiles were without the possibility of life, like long-dry bones, scattered aimlessly about a parched and desolate valley. No human help could restore her. Judah was beyond all hope.” (E. Achtemeier. “Can These Bones Live?”)

Can these bones live? That’s the question God puts to humanity when the Lord addressed Ezekiel in his vision. Do you believe, really believe, that the dry places of your lives can indeed be replenished in the here and now—not just in eternity—by me, the Lord your God—wherever you happen to be.

How does the soldier in a wheelchair, crippled by an IED, asking, “Do I have a future?” answer?

How does the couple sitting in a counselor’s office, asking “Can our marriage be saved?” answer?

How does the widow who saw her precious husband’s casket lowered in the ground, asking, “Can I go on?” answer?

How did the people of Judah, exiled from their homeland, asking “How can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land” answer?

“Son of man, can these bones live?” God asked Ezekiel. Can that which is dead be returned to life? Can a situation that has been written off as hopeless be revived, resurrected? Is there any hope?

When we don’t believe in the Holy Spirit, when we don’t give credence to God alive and well on earth, then it is easy to answer that question negatively. I thought about that recently after the news reported the

suicide of the former S. Korean President. There are some of us who do not believe that there's any hope for the dried out bones of our life.

And of course, I'm sure that many of Ezekiel's fellow citizens felt the same way. They, too, might have responded, "No, Lord. There's no way that dry bones can live. They're too far gone."

But that's not how Ezekiel answered God's question—"Can These Dry Bones Live." The prophet simply held up his hands in humility, aware of his own limits, his own finitude, and said, 'O Lord God, only thou knowest.' Human means are not sufficient to overwhelm the forces of death that hold captive our life and world. Try as we may, we seem never able to set all things right. Broken relationships, suffering, crime, violence, and evil — none of our programs seem to do away with them forever. For every solution, there is a new problem, for every program, an unforeseen shortcoming, and unless healing and restoration are in the hands of God, good life seems impossible. Our bones are dried up; we are clean cut off. O God, will you restore us?

Then God gave Ezekiel the Word which called the bones to come together, to get a hold of themselves, to snap to it, sinew by sinew. And then the Lord gave Ezekiel the word to summon from the four winds the breath of life. It was a dry wind that blew gently at first, and then grew exceedingly more forceful. And Ezekiel called that dry wind the breath of God.

God's breath entered the inert forms; they live! And they stood upon their own two feet, "an exceedingly great host" (vv. 9-10). And God said, "O my people...I put my Spirit within you, and you shall live."

This is why the study of history is so important. Because we, many generations later, can attest to the fact that the Spirit did sustain those Judeans 2500 years ago—and their descendants time and time again.

Just as we can attest to the fact that we have felt that same “breath of fresh air” in our own lungs, in our own beings, just when we’ve felt our driest, deadest.

And that’s why worship as a part of a church community is so important—because here it is, week after week, that we hear how the Spirit has moved throughout time and is moving in the here and now.

It doesn’t matter How your worship. What matters is THAT you worship.

It doesn’t matter which church you go to. It matters that you go to church.

And here’s why I believe that—aside from being a minister.

It is in worship that I have felt the breath of God breathed through the words of scripture as history—what God has done for eons in the world.

It is in worship that I have felt the breath of God breathed through the words of scripture as a healing balm to me right now—hearing just the right thing I need to hear at a particular moment in my life.

It is as a part of a church community that I have witnessed how God is still at work. If I had not been at EDCC, I wouldn’t have met Ed Bentley, and heard his amazing tale of being a prisoner of war, and atrocities that he experienced, and the moment when God breathed new life on him—with a wing and prayer from an airplane flown by his father.

The Spirit is alive and well, in churches hushed with awe and reverent wonder, in congregations shouting and praising Jesus.

There’s a Dry Wind still blowing across our earth, breathing life into these dry bones of ours! Thanks be to God.