

Date: June 4, 2006

SUNDAY: Pentecost

SERMON: Dry Bones; Living Church

Text(s): Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

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A young minister not long out of seminary, was serving his first parish. As is usually the case, it was a small parish, and, as is often also the case it was an affectionate, if not a particularly lively congregation. The people always wanted to sing the same few old favorite hymns (from the Pilgrim hymnal, of course) and complained whenever the young pastor picked an unfamiliar tune with an upbeat rhythm. The organist, who was well-advanced in years, if not in proficiency, couldn't play at any tempo faster than a funeral dirge anyway. And when he preached, the older men immediately drifted off to sleep while their wives kept a smile on their faces, but their eyes told him that they were really finishing the Sunday lunch menu in their heads.

But, like most young pastors, he was sure his creativity and enthusiasm could wake them up and get them marching toward the Kingdom at a livelier pace. So as Pentecost Sunday came around, he hit on a brilliant idea. He enlisted one of the few youngsters in the congregation to be his assistant. About a half hour before the people began to arrive for church, he sent nine-year old Tommy up the ladder that was permanently fastened to the back wall of the sanctuary, and which led into the space above the ceiling. In the very center of the ceiling, there was a fairly large air vent. He gave Tommy a white dove that he'd purchased from a pet store. He told Tommy to sit up there above that opening in the ceiling, and listen very intently to the sermon, which for that Pentecost Sunday, naturally, was a sermon about the Holy Spirit. At a certain point, he would raise his voice, fling up his arms, look upward dramatically and say, "And the Holy Spirit shall descend upon us like a dove." At that moment, Tommy was supposed to release the white dove through that grate in the ceiling, and let it fly down over the congregation. That would at least

wake up the sleepers and replace the complacent smiles of the faces of the smilers, he thought, if only for a few moments.

One of the lessons he hadn't learned in seminary, apparently, is the one that says that preachers should never try to be too clever. So when he came to that moment in the sermon, lifted his arms and raised his eyes, and proclaimed in his best Shakespearean stage voice, "And the Holy Spirit shall descend upon us from heaven like a dove," he lifted his eyes toward heaven and paused dramatically. . . and nothing happened. No dove. "Oh no," he thought, "Tommy has fallen asleep or he's not paying attention." So he raised his voice even louder and repeated, "And one of these days the Holy Spirit will descend from heaven like a dove." Pause. Still no dove. "Like a dove, like a dove!"

Just then Tommy put his face down to the hole in the ceiling and yelled down, "There's a cat up here that ate the dove. Do you want me to throw the cat down?"

Well, we don't have any doves this morning, and no cats that I know of, but we are celebrating God's gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God among the people of God; the very same Spirit of Life that raised Jesus from the dead is the Spirit that animates and empowers the Church to be witnesses to the power of God to give new life to the dead.

The rhythm of the church year is, for the most part, built around the two primary festivals of Christmas and Easter, festivals which have whole seasons and multiple Sundays associated with them and which are associated with the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

Pentecost, however, is the festival that celebrates how the same love of God that was disclosed in Jesus, now incarnates itself again in the community of believers, the church. The rest of the year, from today until the beginning Advent, when we start the liturgical year all over again, is the time in which the church, in the power of the Spirit, carries out its mission of

proclaiming the Good News that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, as a sign of God's ultimate victory over the powers of death at work in the world. We call that long period Ordinary Time, because it is the time when we live out our Christian calling to be witnesses to the possibility of that new life in the ordinary round of daily events and routines.

The searing vision of the prophet Ezekiel in the valley of the dry bones was a powerful message of hope to the exiles of the ancient citizens of Jerusalem who had been conquered and taken into captivity by the Babylonian empire. The exiles were like that valley of skeletons, their hope gone, their life dried up, their political and social institutions in ruins.

And yet, in the midst of that valley of dry bones, came the promise of new life. *"O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. I will cause breath (or spirit—it's the same word) to enter you, and you shall live. . . and you shall know that I am the Lord."*

What Ezekiel saw in a vision, St. Luke tells in a story. It's a story built upon Luke's own rich reflections on a variety of Old Testament stories—the stories of Creation, the Tower of Babel, and the gift of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai to name the three most obvious. There are many layers of meaning in Luke's Pentecost story, but two stand out. The first is that this is a story of new life springing forth from death. The images of the living tongues of fire and the rushing wind all speak of life and warmth and energy and hope. The very word that is translated wind is the same word that may also be translated breath or spirit in the Creation stories in Genesis. It is the presence of life. It's a story about how the defeated, disillusioned, and dried up hopes of the disciples after Jesus' crucifixion, came suddenly springing into vibrant life when they began to experience the presence of the risen Christ among them as they worshiped and prayed together. The Holy Spirit is that divine wind, that divine breath, that makes the church more than

just an organization; it makes us a living organism.

The second thing that stands out in Luke's narrative is that this new life that animates the community of believers is not primarily for the private enjoyment or enrichment of the individual members of the community; rather it is a gift meant to be shared with the whole world. In Luke's story, as soon as the community of disciples experiences this new surge of life which the Spirit brings, they immediately begin to proclaim the Good News about the resurrection of Jesus to the whole world. The Spirit is the life and light and fire of God's love that we carry out of the church into the world around us. The Spirit makes us a missionary people. When we are truly being the church, the emphasis should not be so much on what we are experiencing ourselves, but on what God is doing through us for the world. We are signs of life, signs of hope. We are skeletons who have been revived in order to proclaim to other dry bones that the creative wind of new life is blowing over the earth.

You've heard me say before that one of our favorite cities in France is Rouen, the provincial capital of Normandy. One of my favorite places in Rouen, not nearly as well-known or visited as the cathedral that Monet painted or the church of St. Joan of Arc, is the medieval cemetery where victims of the Black Death were buried. It's tucked away off the street and you have to see the inconspicuous sign and then make your way back a narrow cobblestoned passageway. When you finally step through a doorway at the back of the passageway, you discover that you are in a large courtyard, about 100 yards long by 50 yards wide, with a pleasant stand of trees and grass in the center, and encircled on all four sides by a continuous two-story building in the old Norman half-timbered architecture. The courtyard itself is where the plague victims were buried, but nearly big enough to hold all those who died of the bubonic

plague. So the building which surrounds the courtyard, was a charnel house. After the bodies had decomposed, they were exhumed, and the bones were cleaned and then stored in the buildings. There they would remain, growing ever drier and more brittle, while new plague victims took their place in the courtyard below. The unique architectural feature of the building is that the wooden beam, the lintel, that separates the ground floor from the floor above it, and runs continuously all around the courtyard, is fantastically carved with skulls and crossbones, gravediggers tools, coffins, and other symbols of death.

What really fascinates me, however, is that the former charnel house, that repository of dry bones, with its reminders of death, is now the thriving school of fine arts for Normandy, and in all of the rooms, you may see vibrantly alive young people painting or sculpting or learning to make pottery. In the very buildings carved with the symbols of mortality and death, a school dedicated to life and beauty is flourishing. But those young artists won't stay there in that enclosed courtyard forever. They will learn the fundamentals of their art or craft, and then leave that school and go out into the world to share their gifts of artistic beauty with others.

For me, that plague cemetery is a metaphor of the church in the power of Pentecost. In the midst of a world where death and mortality, spiritual dryness and hopelessness is the experience of so many, we are a community into whose bones life has been breathed, bones alive with the fire and wind of the spirit, a community dedicated to life and beauty, a community called from every nation and language and people to witness to the presence of the Risen One. That's our calling— to bear witness that there is a way out of the violence and strife and inhumanity that characterize so much of human life in the world. The world needs to see that there are ways of living together that foster life rather than death. It is in our unity and

love, a unity and love that springs from our experience of God's life in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that the world will have hope that such life is possible for everyone.