

From the Prophet Ezekiel: The Lord's power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord's Spirit, God led me out and set me down in the middle of a certain valley. It was full of bones. God led me through them all around, and I saw that there were a great many of them on the valley floor, and they were very dry. God asked me, "Mortal, can these bones live again?" I said, "Lord God, only You know." God said to me, "Prophecy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord's word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord." I prophesied just as I was commanded. There was a great noise as I was prophesying, then a great quaking, and the bones came together, bone by bone. When I looked, suddenly there were sinews on them. The flesh appeared, and then they were covered over with skin. But there was still no breath in them. God said to me, "Prophecy to the breath; prophecy, Mortal! Say to the breath, The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live." I prophesied just as God commanded me. When the breath entered them, they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company. God said to me, "Mortal, these bones are the entire house of Israel. They say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished.' So now, prophecy and say to them, The Lord God you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I've spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says." Ezekiel 37: 1-14

This is a playful scripture on this playful day, when we celebrate the playful Holy Spirit. This is not the usual story we hear on Pentecost Sunday; when the disciples gathered on the celebration of Shavuot, the spring harvest festival of the Israelites, and the Holy Spirit appeared to them as the rush of wind and as flames of fire. On that day the disciples spoke in many languages, testifying about their experiences of Jesus, the Messiah, and they were heard and understood by the crowds who'd gathered from many different places. That first Pentecost was a day so miraculous that many people who were there, and who saw and heard and experienced the Holy Spirit, believed in the power and presence of the Living God, and became followers of Jesus.

Today's scripture is from the prophet Ezekiel, who was given a vision from God. Although this story has been turned into a playful song, the vision the Lord gave to Ezekiel

was grim: a valley of dry bones, of a people long dead. The Lord showed Ezekiel the dry bones and asked him, “Mortal, can these bones live again?” I can picture Ezekiel saying to the Lord, “Oy! Only You know, Lord!” God said to Ezekiel, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Lord’s word! The Lord God proclaims to these bones: I am about to put breath in you, and you will live again. I will put sinews on you, place flesh on you, and cover you with skin. When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.”

“When I put breath in you, and you come to life, you will know that I am the Lord.” That’s why this is a Pentecost scripture; it’s another place where the Holy Spirit showed up and breathed new life (and new understanding) into God’s favorite project: humanity. On their own, the valley of dry bones could do nothing until the Spirit of God, the breath of God, entered into them.

The first disciples gathered for Shavuot, just 50 days after Easter (Pentecost means 50) when the anguish and horror of Good Friday were still fresh, and still haunting them. But the promised breath of God, the Holy Spirit, showed up so unpredictably and playfully, as tongues of fire and the rush of wind, that the disciples, and many people around them, were given new life, new language, new understanding, and new hearts. I think the Holy Spirit shows up playfully because we are disarmed by playfulness, we can be as children who are surprised and delighted, and our shields of cynicism and disbelief are temporarily lowered.

But not a pretty picture for Ezekiel in the valley of the dead, where the Lord showed him a heap of dried up bones. The Lord told Ezekiel, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; there is nothing

left of us.” Before this vision the Lord had told Ezekiel to prophesy to the Israelites, “Thus says the Lord God... a new heart I will give you, and a new spirit (or breath) I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

This vision of the valley of bones was the nation of Israel, in exile and in despair. The word despair means “without spirit.” Israel had been cut off from their homeland, and they believed, they had been cut off from God. But God never gives up. God never gives up on us. The vision the Lord gave to Ezekiel was breathtakingly impossible: God would restore the bones, put flesh and sinews on them and breathe God’s Spirit into them and make them live and dance. That’s why there’s a playful song about this scripture... because of our playful God, always surprising us, always showing up when it seems that there is no hope, always breathing new life into us.

This scripture, and this day, are an invitation to us to dream together about the future. What are our visions for this place, and for us, and for those who haven’t found us yet? How will we, and how do we, invite the breath of God’s Spirit into our community, and into our shared ministries? These are serious times in the world, and as the church we’re aware of the unrest and injustice and suffering in the world... and of a country and a planet that seems to be spiraling out of control. We need to pray for hearts of flesh that ache and are restless because of the despair (“without spirit”) of the hungry, the immigrant, the homeless, the lonely, and the outcast.

The Holy Spirit breathed life into the dried-up bones, and into the new church gathered on Pentecost, and still today, the Holy Spirit breathes life into us. The new life the Holy Spirit continually promises us (this is not a one-time-offer) is not for us to hold or

hoard, but for us to use to help heal the brokenness of the world, to reveal God, and to help build God's kingdom. "I will put My Spirit within you, and you shall live, and then you will know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will do it." The Lord had Ezekiel prophesy to the dry bones that God had not given up. God never gives up on us.

This vision of the valley of dry bones is part of our history as God's people. Not only in the scriptures but in our own experiences of despair ("without spirit") over the dryness of our spiritual lives, and the death of our hope for God's Kingdom "come on earth as it is in heaven." On our own we are like the dried-up bones and can do nothing to revive ourselves, our hope, our enthusiasm, our faith. But here comes the playful Holy Spirit, breathing new life, a new song, a dance-move of bones reattaching, to remind us that God is present and is working in us and through us... and that we are, as followers of Jesus and as His body, the church... we are always a work in progress.

Barbara Levander asked me last night if the fire from the volcanoes in Hawaii is the reason that our Pentecost theme is Hawaiian. I was so grateful that she gave me the idea! The truth (or the original idea) was that we'd celebrate today with a Pacific Island congregation, invite them to join us, and hear the scripture in another language, and share a feast. And then the District Superintendent called me and told me that the Bishop is appointing me to the Napa Church... and what I can do here in the time that's left, has had to scale down. So we have a modified Pacific Island celebration today, on this day of miracle and playfulness, to remind us and invite us into the miracle and playfulness of the Holy Spirit.

On this day of Pentecost let us breathe deeply of the promises of God: that Jesus is always with us, that each of us is given a mission and ministry for the building and

revealing of God's Kingdom, and that the Holy Spirit invites us to dance with our playful God. Amen.