

# *Newness of Life*

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Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-4

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Lewinsville Presbyterian Church

Our Old Testament reading from Ezekiel this morning may be familiar to some of you from the old song, “Dem bones, dem bones, them dry bones,” with its graphic lyrics of the ‘toe bone’s connected to the foot bone, and the foot bone’s connected to the ankle bone.’ Some of you may love this passage, others of you may simply think it’s weird, what with bones rattling together, bone to bone, and then being covered by sinew and flesh and skin. There is a bit of a Monty Python ring to the passage. All it’s missing is a few cicadas to make the weirdness complete.

But within all of this strangeness is the core promise of biblical faith, which is that God gives new life to people who are as good as dead. That is the case at Easter, and it is the case on the day of Pentecost. It is the case for adults, and it is the case for young people who are being confirmed. Christian faith, at its core, is not about the brilliance of human potential, or about what great things we can do if we just put our minds together, though Christian faith has a few things to say about those things. Christian faith, at its core, is about God’s power and God’s readiness to give new life, new energy, and new vision to people and institutions and countries and a planet that can seem dead to any objective observer. Christian faith, at its center, is not about us, but about God and what God can do.

In Ezekiel 37, we have a memorable - and graphic - depiction of this new life being given to a valley of dry bones, which becomes a visual metaphor for what the community of faith, the people of Israel, had become. Renewal comes to this people, to these dry bones, but the renewal is not the result of a clever 7-point strategy for church growth. The people of Israel did not accomplish their renewal themselves. They cannot turn around and congratulate themselves and say, “Well, look at what we did! Aren’t we great!” Renewal comes to them as a gift from God, it is given them by the breath of the living God. Renewal always comes as a gift from God. It may be sought, it may be pursued even, but it cannot be earned. In the end it is given by the grace of the living God.

This is the same living God who, in Genesis 2 breathed life into dust and formed Adam, *adam*, a living being. Newness of life. This is the same living God whom the apostle Paul describes in Romans 4 as the God who “gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” Newness of life. God makes alive those who were as good as dead. Biblical faith is not about our own accomplishments. It is about the redemptive, liberating, renewing power of God.

According to Ezekiel 37 and a whole lot of other passages, the Spirit of God is deeply at work in unlikely places and among unlikely people. Which means that there is a warning here. Whenever we find ourselves commenting on someone, saying under our breath,

“What a loser,” we should hear the bell that is going off somewhere, for that is where the Spirit of God is likely to be. We should hear this even if the person we are talking about is ourselves, and we think that we’re a loser and are engaged in self-loathing inner talk.

As we approach the 1-year anniversary this week of the murder of George Floyd, and as we come to terms with the racial separation and division that is within us and around us; as we walk and pray with the people of Israel and Palestine through their age-old conflict; as we make our own way in this country through the polarization that can intensify so many conversations, whenever we find ourselves saying, “I can’t stand those people,” we should hear the bell that is going off somewhere, for that is where the Spirit of God is likely to be.

This work of the Holy Spirit among unlikely people may be hard to believe for those of us who like winners. I’m a little embarrassed to say that that’s how I often root for sports teams. When I was growing up in the 1970s, you couldn’t pay me to go to an Atlanta Braves baseball game. They were awful. The Atlanta Falcons football team was even worse. But all that changed in the 1990s when the Braves started to win. Suddenly, mysteriously, I became a big fan. I believe the technical phrase for this is being a “fair-weather fan.” I confess to my crime.

It’s been said, “Everybody loves a winner.”

That may be the mantra of the world, and especially, the mantra of the marketplace, but it is not the mantra of Jesus, it is not the mantra of the Holy Spirit, and it is not the mantra of the church. The Holy Spirit is allied, time and time again, with people, institutions, and places that are unlikely, who have been given up on, who are dried up and left for dead. Dry bones. It is at moments of darkness and grief and failure that the Spirit has its deepest gifts to give.

The Day of Pentecost also stands as a reminder to us that we should be very careful before giving up on ourselves. It is never too late to receive the Holy Spirit and to be renewed in our faith and in our lives. Jesus was getting at this, when he said, “Come unto me, all you that are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” Rest and renewal and new strength are gifts that God always stands ready to give.

On this Pentecost Sunday, as our six confirmands stand, looking into the future of their journeys of faith, they – and we – are invited to understand that we are being summoned to be *receivers* of God’s new life, and to be *agents* of God’s new life in the lives of others. You are invited to receive God’s Spirit, God’s breath, God’s mercy into your own heart and your own life. Know, deep in your bones, at a level that no one can ever take away from you, that you are the beloved of God, and nothing can change that. Nothing that you can do can change the fact that you are the beloved of God, and nothing that anyone else can do to you can change that fact.

You are also invited to allow God’s Spirit, God’s breath, God’s mercy to flow through you into the lives of others. You all know people who do not know that they are beloved.

You all know people who are depressed, people who do not like themselves, people who don't think they belong, people who want someone to pay attention to them. God is inviting you to allow God's own Spirit to flow through you into their lives and into the world.

As we bring these passages into conversation with our lives, they raise a few questions for us. What will it feel like to receive the Holy Spirit into our lives? What will it look like for Presbyterians, who are sometimes called the "frozen chosen," to receive the power of the Spirit into our congregation? It may look different than when a Pentecostal congregation receives the Spirit. But what will it look like? Looking more specifically at your individual life, what parts of your life might be described as dry? What would renewal look like in that area of your life? What will renewal look like in the life of one of your family members, or in the life of one of your friends?

To God and to God alone be all the glory. AMEN.