**Can These Bones Live?**

May 23, 2021 Pentecost

The Rev. Dr. Susan Gilbert Zencka

Frame Memorial Presbyterian Church

Texts: John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15;Ezekiel 37:1-14

I know, this is not the usual Pentecost story –where is the rushing wind, the tongues of fire, the speaking and understanding many languages, and 5,000 new believers joining the church, right? And I deliberately didn’t choose that story for a couple of reasons. First, I love the story from Ezekiel for so many reasons, and we’ll talk about some of them. Second, that familiar Pentecost story, especially alongside the passage from John’s Gospel, suggests that the Holy Spirit’s work began on Pentecost, 7 weeks after Easter. But we know that’s not true, right?

As you all surely know by now because I’ve mentioned it many times over the years, both in Greek and in Hebrew, there is one word that means breath, wind, and Spirit. In Hebrew, the word is *ruach*; in Greek, it is *pneuma.*  So in any given verse, it is the choice of the translator whether to translate these as wind, spirit, or breath.

And, these words are in use long before the spectacular events in Jerusalem 7 weeks after Easter in the traditional Pentecost story. Listen to the very first two verses in the Bible:

*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,****2****the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from Godswept over the face of the waters.* [NRSV]

*When God began to createthe heavens and the earth—****2****the earth was without shape or form, it was dark over the deep sea, and God’s wind swept over the waters—* [Common English Bible]

*In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.*

***2****And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.* [KJV]

And The Message version translated by the late Presbyterian minister Eugene Peterson: *First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss.*

And you could just as well have said, “God’s breath moved across the waters….” And by the way, this is not a creation *ex nihilo*, from nothing. There was something—formless and empty, yes, in Hebrew *tohu va bohu,* but it was the stuff of possibility.

In Psalm 104, a beautiful hymn to creation, we find one of my favorite Spirit references in verses 29-30, but listen—the same word occurs in both verses, but in one version is translated differently in each verse:

*When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
    when you take away their breath, they die  
    and return to their dust.****30****When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
    and you renew the face of the ground.* [NRSV]

And from the Common English Bible:

*But when you hide your face, they are terrified;  
    when you take away their breath,  
    they die and return to dust.****30****When you let loose your breath, they are created,  
    and you make the surface of the ground brand-new again.* [Common English Bible]

At least in that version they maintain using the same word.

There are a couple of points I’m trying to make here—one is that the translations are ambiguous—wind, breath, spirit all are from the same Hebrew word, and from the same Greek word in the New Testament. And secondly, much more important, the idea that God’s living spirit was active among us was not a new idea 7 weeks after the first Easter. It had been part of the theology of the Hebrew scriptures from the very beginning. God’s breath, God’s wind, God’s spirit has been animating, inspiring, and supporting creation since the Big Bang…and is still.

So, what are the important things to remember from this? I have 3 points to make:

(1) God is real. As I said three weeks ago in my sermon, God is a real, material force in the universe, just as wind and breath are real and material. God is a physical power in the world and the character of that power is love. Recognizing reality is a critical task of discipleship. Over the course of my ministry, I have tried to be honest, and name reality when I saw it, whether that made us uncomfortable or not. For example, for the last 14 months, I have preached from my study, from our cabin, from the woods, and two weeks ago from the riverfront. Many ministers have been preaching from empty churches in order to create the familiar picture of what worship looks like. I have not wanted to do that because we are really not in the church, and I want our worship experience to be grounded in reality, even if reality is different than what we want. Let’s be real. We can worship God wherever we really are. And God is really with us, and is really real not just some spiritual idea. The New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson proposed that one of the reasons for the early success of Christianity is that people could see in the lives of the disciples that they had experienced the real power of the living God among them. God is with us…and God is real.

(2) We are important to God. I have two quotes to share with you. One I first shared almost 7 years ago—it is from the Presbyterian theologian Stacy Johnson who said at a gathering of the Covenant Network in 2008 that covenant theology makes “an audacious claim that God has determined not to be God without us…God is not just for us but with us – not just sentiment but solidarity.” Johnson reminds us that the Bible story, “…invites us to envision a different sort of church and different sort of world than we see around us. Unless the church has a dynamic understanding of the Bible and devotes itself to re-imagining what God FOR us, Jesus WITH us and the Spirit AMONG us means for that story today, we’re going to be stuck in a world none of us wants.” God has determined not to be God without us. That is amazing, isn’t it?? A similar sentiment was on an index card I found in a journal of my mother’s—I don’t know if these are her words or someone else’s: “Faith is remembering that I am indispensable to God when I feel I only clutter up the landscape.” We are essential to the mission of God and to the person of God. What does that mean for us, and for how we live in the world?

(3) For the third point, I’m doing three points in one: God never gives up on us, God often surprises us, and we should never think God is finished with us. The story in Ezekiel is to this point. Is it an historically factual story?? I doubt it. But it is a story the prophet told to make this point. When confronted with a situation in which there is no realistic basis for hope, a valley of dry bones, when the situation offers no possibilities, God can still bring new life to us. Of course, Easter tells the same story. God makes a way when there is no way. When we might be filled with despair and emptied of hope, when we may have come to the end of our ropes, God still is a basis for hope. We think of history as being linear, one event leading to another; or sometimes cyclical, being a series of ebbs and flows that progressively continue. But the Bible tells a different story—sometimes God comes to us from the future, or interrupts our plans and our progress with something that upends our expectations—this is true both at the beginning and at the end of the life of Jesus. And it is true at the beginning of creation, God’s spirit hovering over the unformed chaos, the *tohu va bohu* and bringing forth light, and then a world.

I have seen this in my own life. During the years that I have been here among you, I have discovered that God had possibilities within me that I did not know about, possibilities I had not imagined. Just as the unformed chaos, the *tohu va bohu* of the pre-created world was the stuff of possibility, so too is this time a time of possibility for Carl and me, and for you all. Catherine Keller in her newest book *Facing Apocalypse: Climate, Democracy, and Other Last Chances* reminds us that just as at the beginning of the Bible, so too at the end, the Biblical story in Revelation continues to tell the story of a God active in God’s good creation, that God never abandons creation, but is always in the process of renewing creation—the world continues to be a place of “sheer possibility.” All things are possible—great good and great evil are both possible in the world and God is calling us all every day, to make choices, to speak words, and to take actions that participate in the ongoing work of creating the world anew, a world that God and we can pronounce “good.” Our faith isn’t about our own comfort, but about the good of the world.

So as Carl and I head into a new chapter, in a state that is new to him and an area where I’ve never lived; I am excited to see what possibilities will unfold. Can we make a new start at our ages and stage of life? Can these bones live? Absolutely. God is not finished with us…there are more possibilities ahead.

And I am excited for you, too. Frame has had many ministers over the years. Most have served 3-7 years. Three of us have served 15 years or longer—Ed Hunt, Elam Davies, and me. Many of you have been here through several different ministers, and you’ve seen the church go on, serving God and Portage County, caring for one another, and learning new ways of being faithful as times and ministers change. Change is always difficult, but it truly is the only constant in life, and the Bible reminds us again and again that creation is an ongoing and evolving project of God’s in which we are important partners.

We have done new things together: the Season of Creation, the Interfaith Community for the Earth, Practice-based Christian Education, Stephen Ministry, the Community Gardens, Frame Feeds, the Warming Shelter. And you will do new things in the future, and you will continue to do some of what you do particularly well: Community Mission Grants, inviting and inclusive worship, partnering with other churches, welcoming the stranger, feeding the hungry, loving one another. And I will do new things, and some of what I have already been doing, too. God is not finished with us. God’s breath breathes in us, God’s wind ruffles and refreshes us, God’s spirit enlivens, inspires, and guides us…as it has from the beginning. And God is determined not to be God without us.

I love you. While my time with you is ending, love never ends. I leave you with the words of Richard Rohr that I have often shared with you and that I rely on in good times and bad, and especially in times when the future is unknown…as it truly always is:

God is near, God is now, and God is enough. Amen.

**Benediction for the Journey**

(from the Rev. David Colman, Swarthmore Presbyterian Church, 29 February 1976,

found in the journal of Lee Gilbert)

He sent us forth to a land which has been promised

To a land which awaits our coming

That it has been promised is all we know…

We do not know the shape of the land,

the route that we must go,

the dangers that are certain to befall…

But we know to expect our share of desert places

Where oases vanish upon close inspection

And water springs forth from most unlikely rocks

Come.

Let us put on the whole armor of God,

Leaving our hearts exposed

Since life, like death, demands a certain vulnerability

And let us learn a new song to sing in a foreign land.

Be wise as serpents, innocent as doves

Accepting the worst, expecting the best.

We are less what we’ve learned

than what we’ve learned to love…

And love is our journey’s name.

Amen.