

Sermon: May 31, 2009 Pentecost  
Scripture: Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34; Ezekiel 37:1-14  
Sermon Title: "New Life for Old Bones"

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Call to Worship: Psalm 104:24-35  
Leader: How many are your works, O Lord!  
In wisdom you made them all;  
The earth is full of your creatures.  
People: May the glory of the Lord endure forever;  
May the Lord rejoice in his works.  
Leader: I will sing to the Lord all my life;  
I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.  
People: May my meditation be pleasing to God  
As I rejoice in the Lord.  
Leader: But may sinners vanish from the earth  
And the wicked be no more.  
People: Praise the Lord, O my soul.  
Praise the Lord.

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Hymns: #356 Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing  
# 2153 Transform Us  
# 411 Arise, Your Light Is Come!

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Prayer of Confession: Eternal God, we are often like dry bones wasting away in the desert. We are but a shadow of what you created us to be. We have forgotten that it is by the power of Your Spirit that we are able to live and have meaning. But we go off on tangents that do not have real meaning. We get embroiled in pursuits that occupy our time and energies, but do nothing to bless Your creation. And in the end, we feel empty and our spirits are bleached like the bones of Ezekiel's vision. Forgive us, Holy God and bring us back to life so that we might live again to Your glory. In the name of Your Son we pray. Amen.

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Israel was dead. The great temple which Solomon had built was in ruins. The children of Israel had been scattered across the face of Babylon. Things were as dried and shriveled up as bleached bones on a desert floor. Hope was lost and the children of Israel were a people without a future. In July of 586 BC the walls of Jerusalem had been breached and the city was plundered. And on August 14, 586 the entire city, including the Temple was burned to the ground.

Try to capture in your minds the total depravity of the situation. The entire ethos of a nation had been wiped out. Never one of the major powers among nations, Israel had achieved a status in the Middle East as a unique nation, a nation that was founded upon the authority of One God. While all around them other nations sought the pleasures of multiple Gods and Goddesses, only Israel held firm to the concept that there was only one God and that that God had chosen them from among all the other nations of the earth.

In the summer of 586 BC that all came crashing down around them. What had happened? Where was God when his people were being attacked? How could God, who has a personal relationship with his people, allow these things to happen? You can imagine the anguish and depression that must have gripped the remaining Israelites. As they were being transported across the desert to Babylon, their hearts and minds must have been numbed by the thoughts of how it all ended. It was like a rejection by the very God who had chosen them and led them to the Promised Land. But all that was over.

The trouble with this pessimistic outlook is that it totally misreads God's commitment to His people. In the midst of the refugees

which were transported to Babylon was a little known priest called Ezekiel. Early in his career as a priest he warned of the destruction which would come not only to Jerusalem, but to the surrounding nations: Moab, Edom, Philistia, 5tyre, Sidon and Egypt. So, when the onslaught of the Babylonian armies finally came, it should have been no surprise to anyone. Once he was transported to Babylon along with his wife and children, Ezekiel heard the call of God to become a man with prophetic vision. His first message of hope to the remnant was that they should learn to live in peace in the situation they found themselves in. Forget about a quick return to Jerusalem. That's just not going to happen. Learn to live in peace and prosperity where you are and maintain your identity as God's people in this place called Babylon.

Ezekiel understood that the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was a judgment from God on the nation of Israel in response to the corruption and idolotary which ran rampant among the people. They had forgotten the laws of Moses. They had violated the justice and peace of God which held the people together. They had used the Temple for personal gain and had sold their own children into slavery. They had intermarried with pagan people to such a degree that it was difficult to distinguish who was a Hebrew and who was not. And even worse, they had allowed foreigners to bring in their pagan gods and set up temples right in the midst of the Holy City.

Suddenly, in the middle of Ezekiel's writings, his mood changes. No longer words of judgment and destruction from God. In Chapter 37, Ezekiel writes of a new vision he has received from The Lord. It is the vision of a valley of dry bones. Bones which can and do come back to life. His cryptic question: Can these bones live again? Rings in our ears. Sometimes we feel like those dry bones. We have lost our way as individuals and as a nation. We go chasing after illusions. We worship the things that we gather around us and we bow down to powers and forces which

only lead to destruction. There are times when we look at the Church of Jesus Christ and we see dry bones. When did we decide that God has to conform to our understanding of Him. We build God massive edifices called Churches.... Now it's called the Mega Church. Expensive buildings that have all manner of high tech accretions and we keep telling ourselves that God is somehow in those buildings. One church says, we have the finest pipe organ in the land. Another Church says we have a Television production studio that broadcasts to the whole world. And still a third Church points to its fleet of busses which bring in the people every Sunday.

When Elaine and I visited Europe last Fall, we were awed by the massive cathedrals we visited. How great these edifices were, built before the day of modern construction methods, yet awe inspiring in their magnificence. Each one was designed to capture the essence of God and provide a gathering place where God could be worshiped. There we were at the great cathedral in Wells, with hundreds of visitors walking through and all the while in the middle of the great sanctuary a small group of worshipers were saying the daily mass, totally oblivious of our presence.

And the underlying premise is that this is where God is, as if God is captured and confined to our walls. Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us in her book An Altar in the World that she worries “about what happens when we build a house for God. ... a house of worship on every corner,.... Do we build God a house so that we can choose when to go see God? Do we build God a house in lieu of having God stay at ours? ... What happens to people who never show up in our houses of God?”

We need to be aware of the possibility that all our worship and all of our “religious” gyrations only come across as dry bones to God. As a minister in one of the branches of Christ's Church, I need to be constantly aware of the possibility that my words, even the ones

I am now speaking, are as dry bones to God. And the question which God asks Ezekiel has a relevance to us today. “Can these dry bones live?”

And the answer is, “Of course they can live!” God told Ezekiel “O my people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them: I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you , my people, will know that I am the Lord.”

And then God told Ezekiel how this would come about. “I will put my Spirit in you and you will live.”

That’s what had been missing among God’s people. The Spirit! And the way to bring new life to old bones is to allow the Spirit of God to take over. To allow the Spirit of God to be infused into old bones. Old ways and old traditions which we once thought were meaningless can find new life when the Spirit of God takes over. Old Church buildings can come back to life when the Spirit of God, call it the Holy Spirit, takes over and we get out of the way and let The Sprit flow.

When we took that survey last Fall we as a congregation noted that one of the areas of Church life that needs some work is the area of Spiritual Life and Development. Our members responded to some of the questions in such a way that it indicated that we do not involve ourselves in biblical study and prayer. Most of our members reported that their level of spirituality was lower than what might be expected among disciples of Jesus Christ. Can these dry bones live? Of course they can. We don’t have to become a shouting and hollering congregation. But we do need to develop more ways for our members and visitors to feel God’s Spirit alive in our worship and in our Sunday School program.

You know, sometimes I feel the Spirit of God moving in this Church when the Choir sings a number that has fabulous harmony

and meaningful words. And the choir gets so wrapped up in the music that we are lost in the beauty and meaning. Doesn't happen every Sunday, but it does happen often enough for me to know that God's Spirit is at work through anthems of praise. Perhaps you have felt it too. And then there are times when the Wednesday Prayer Fellowship meets in my office and we simply lay out there a list of prayer needs. The earnest prayers of each member of the group would make most preachers feel ashamed. You know, we preachers went to Seminary to learn how to pray in a decent and orderly fashion. Sometimes our prayers are like dry bones. But simply be a part of Wednesday Prayer Fellowship and discover how The Holy Spirit can come alive in simple and meaningful prayer.

Today is celebrated as Pentecost Sunday. We celebrate the Holy Spirit that came upon the disciples in Jerusalem and caused them to preach the Gospel in languages which foreigners understood. Dry bones were coming alive through those disciples. The Holy Spirit was infusing itself in the lives of those men and women. Christ had promised that The Comforter would come and be with his disciples. When Christ becomes real in the life of a sinner, you can actually see the dry bones come alive. When Christ becomes real in the life of a congregation, you can experience the dry bones coming alive. When a Church forgets its own life and commits itself to a ministry of compassion and love, you can watch the dry old bones come alive.

Here at Altavista Presbyterian our driest bones are found in the desert wasteland of the 9:00 Sunday School Hour. Think about it now, how many of us would invite a new family in town that has several children to come to Sunday School at 9:00am? Except for the Adult Class there is very little going on. We have the rooms, wonderfully painted and equipped with all manner of books and literature, tables and video machines. But the dry bones of committed teachers are lying out there in a desert wasteland

somewhere. Can these dry bones live. Well, of course they can, but not unless there is an infusion of God's Spirit into those of you who want to see a revived and vital Christian Education program here at Altavista Presbyterian. On Tuesday evening at Committee night, I will be working with the Christian Education Committee to find ways to rejuvenate our Christian Education program. And it means that some of us who have decided that we have done our stint as teachers will have to rethink the idea that we can retire from God's work. The word "Retirement" does not occur in the scriptures.

Can these bones live? Of course they can... but not without the power of the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit is experienced most profoundly when it is alive in people. People who are more than dry bones, but living examples of Christ's Love at work in the world.

Amen

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