

The Festival of Pentecost
May 30-31, 2009
Ezekiel 37:1-14

“Breathing New Life into Our Bones”

How do you breathe new life into the bones of a 53-year-old individual? At this mid-life point, we'd probably say things like: watch what you eat – cut out the sweets and junk food, put more fresh fruits and vegetables into your diet. Or get into some sort of exercise routine that will stretch and firm up the body, giving you a good cardiovascular workout and keeping off those extra pounds. Or find creative ways to handle stress in life that will help you achieve more of a balance. Some might say to breathe new life into those 53-year-old bones that a person should follow his or her passion in life, citing that often-quoted phrase, “Do what you love and the money will follow.” There's another quote that builds on this one: “Do what you love and the money will follow, if you don't starve first.” How do we re-capture the zest and joy of living, breathing new life into 53-year-old bones? As I've been talking about this, you've probably been wondering: “Is he 53? Is that how old he is?” And the answer is no, not yet, but closing in on it. The 53-year-old individual I'm talking about is this congregation, St. John's Lutheran Church. On this Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit, the One who calls us and keeps us in this one true faith, the question I'd like to put before us is this: how will new life be breathed into the bones of this 53-year-old body – the Body of Christ that is St. John's Lutheran Church? May the Lord's rich blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word, for Jesus' sake.

In Ezekiel's vision from today's first Scripture reading, there is this valley full of dry bones – maybe some 53-year-old bones among them. The point is, they are dead and lifeless. There's no breath in them. Not only is there no breath in them, but they're also lacking other essentials – vital organs, sinews, flesh, skin. The Lord's question to Ezekiel seems pretty obvious, even ridiculous: **“Mortal, can these bones live?”** (Ez. 37:3). From a human perspective, that answer seems like a big “Duh!” Of course, not. These bones cannot live. But in faith, Ezekiel puts aside what he thinks is possible and wisely replies to the Lord: **“O Lord God, you know”** (Ez. 37:3). And God then does the impossible as bones come together, covering them with flesh and skin, and finally causing the breath of life to come into them. In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, the word for both spirit and breath is the same: *ruah*. God then tells Ezekiel that the bones are his chosen people who say, **“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely”** (Ez. 37:11). Exiled in the strange land of Babylon, far from home in Judea and Jerusalem, their city and temple destroyed by the conquering Babylonian army, God's people felt that life was over for them. Into the midst of their hopelessness, God comes to his downhearted people and tells them: **“I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord”** (Ez. 37:14). God was indeed breathing new life into the bones of his people. He did indeed place them again on their own soil as they returned home from exile some seventy years later. But the real fulfillment of the Lord's promise that he would put his spirit within them didn't come until fifty days after Jesus rose from the dead, when **“there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind...”** and **“divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among [the disciples]...”** and **“all of them were filled with the Holy Spirit...”** (Acts 2:2-4). As bizarre as Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones was, equally strange is the sending of the Spirit: the sound of the rushing wind, the tongues of fire, the ability to suddenly speak in other languages. Scripture is full of examples of how God breathes new life into the bones of his people, often in very unexpected and surprising ways.

So, what about our bones? Do we, like Israel of old, feel dried up – like our hope is lost and we are cut off completely? Maybe we do. If we do, we stand in a very long line of other believers throughout the ages who have felt that way. This past week, we hosted one of the Spanish Language Mission Developer candidates, Rev. Pedro Lopez, and his wife, Francisca. For a very long time – years, in fact, we’ve been praying, working, and planning for this. At various points along the way, this mission possibility felt like it was drying up and hope was being lost. So, to have a real live candidate in our midst was a huge boost. The three covenant congregations of Grace-Woodbridge, Prince of Peace-Springfield, and St. John’s all had opportunity to meet Pastor & Mrs. Lopez and interact with him. He had some challenging things for us to consider, like is there real support in our congregations for this mission endeavor? Or is the support only from just a few individuals? That is a very good question to ask ourselves right now. I was asking myself this question at the forum on Thursday evening at the meet-and-greet forum at Prince of Peace. Are we serious about Spanish Language Mission and the calling of a Mission Developer? If we are, and my prayer is that we are, it will take all of us working together to support this great undertaking for the sake of God’s mission to the world. We have another candidate visit coming up the second week of June when Pastor Dana Brones will visit, so I invite and encourage you to come to the forum that we’ll host here on Tuesday evening, June 9. Behind all of this is God’s Word recorded in Acts 2: **“Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”** (Acts 2:21). But how can they call on the name of the Lord unless someone goes out to tell them about the Lord? Pentecost, the sending of the Spirit, is the igniter event, the catalyst, that breathes new life into our bones. The Holy Spirit is the One who propels God’s people to go forth into the world with the good news of Jesus – the Jesus whose death upon the cross has brought us forgiveness, life, and salvation.

Even now, the Spirit is breathing new life into our bones; into the bones of this 53-year-old body of believers. As God’s Word is read, studied, and proclaimed among us, the Spirit is breathing new life into us. As we come together around God’s gifts of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, receiving these gifts in faith for the forgiveness of sin and the strengthening of faith, the Spirit is breathing new life into us. As we daily die to sin and rise to new life in Christ, as we seek to serve Christ in our neighbor, as we encourage and strengthen one another in our journey of faith, the Spirit is breathing new life into us. May the Holy Spirit revive, refresh, and renew us all to be God’s instruments of grace and blessing in the world as He breathes new life into our bones. Amen.