

May 19, 2024
“(Re)born of the Spirit”
Ezekiel 37:1-14 / Acts 2:1-18
Pastor Tim

I played a lot of sports growing up, and a few through high school – including my favorite, basketball. As a result, I heard more than my fair share of peppy cheerleading cheers.

One in particular stands out in my memory from those high-school basketball games. It was an interactive cheer, a call-and-response between the cheerleaders and the crowd.

Allow me to demonstrate. And, if you would, to help set the scene, imagine me standing before you with pom-poms, as one of, say, six or eight cheerleaders.

We got spirit, yes we do! We got spirit, how 'bout you!

We got spirit, yes we do! We got spirit, how 'bout you!

So let's imagine something like that back-and-forth going on the day of Pentecost – the story Amy just read for us. The Jewish festival of *Shavuot*, the Festival or Feast of Weeks – originally a harvest pilgrimage festival now celebrating the giving of the Law, *Torah*. Celebrated 50 days after Passover, the day after seven weeks, seven Sabbaths.

And so Pentecost then – from the Greek word, meaning fiftieth – celebrated by Christians 50 days after Easter.

So let's imagine the disciples and other early followers of Jesus gathered together in Jerusalem to celebrate Pentecost, *Shavuot* – Jesus having previously promised them God's Spirit as their ongoing Advocate. A constant companion to journey with them.

They are gathered together when that same Spirit begins to move in their midst – “suddenly from heaven a sound like the sweeping of a mighty wind. And filled with that same Spirit, they begin to speak, as the text tells us, “about God's deeds of power.” To give testimony to the presence of God in their lives. And they do so, somehow, in other languages, in languages not their own. With “tongues of fire.”

Spirit moving as both wind and fire.

They are out-Spiriting each other in different languages. And so fellow Jews living in Jerusalem, people originally from all over, from “every nation under heaven” we’re told, are able NOT ONLY to hear, but to understand, what’s being said.

People from Parthia and Medes and Elam, Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia (FRYJIA) and Pamphylia, Egypt and Libya, Cyrene, Rome, Crete, Arabia. We may not recognize all the names, but we get the point. This is an extremely diverse gathering.

“Amazed and astonished, they asked, ‘Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?’”

Spirit moving as wind and fire. The Spirit is alive and working miracles among the people, empowering connection and community. The Spirit is alive and working miracles THROUGH the people – empowering them to do what God does, making possible EVEN the seemingly impossible.

We know the disciples and early followers of Jesus were afraid with Jesus, their teacher and leader, no longer with them in the flesh. Of course they were. Even after he appeared to them, post-Crucifixion and post-Resurrection. Even after he promised them God’s Spirit.

But I think we are meant to hear in this story of Pentecost a profound and even miraculous shift from fear to power. We are meant to hear holy boldness.

People, filled with God’s Spirit, NO LONGER AFRAID to continue the work that Jesus started, that Jesus embodied – witnessing to the power of God’s love, divine love, to make possible even the seemingly impossible. In our lives, and in the world around us.

We’re talking about, and celebrating, the Spirit this morning. God’s Spirit, the Holy Spirit, moving, still, in OUR midst. That is the thread running through THIS Sunday.

We began with baptism. Celebrating what it means to be “born of water and the Spirit.” Recalling the Spirit, descended like a dove, affirming Jesus’ belovedness in the eyes of God during his own baptism. And so celebrating and affirming and claiming that divine belovedness for Oliver. And for ourselves.

And celebrating the good news that the Spirit enables and empowers us all to be REborn, again and again and again throughout our lives. To return to our individual and collective belovedness because it is SO EASY to stray from that truth. To return to what Dr. King called the “beloved community” and what Jesus called the “realm of God,” the kingdom of God.

OLD love inspiring NEW life, again and again and again – in our lives, and in the world around us. EVEN when new life seems impossible.

We also read and heard the prophet Ezekiel’s dramatic vision in a valley full of bones. Dry bones. Lives long lost.

Ezekiel, himself “brought out by the Spirit,” is empowered by God to prophesy in the midst of this valley of dry bones. OF ALL PLACES.

God says to Ezekiel, “Mortal, can these bones live?” And Ezekiel responds in a way that seems to acknowledge the limitation of his own view, his own imagination, while appropriately and faithfully remaining open to God’s: “O HOLY ONE, you know.” YOU know.

I hear in that simple response Ezekiel saying something like, “Far be it from me to determine what is possible and what is not. Far be it from me to rule out the possibility of new life EVEN when new life seems impossible to me.” EVEN in a valley full of dry bones, a place marked entirely by death. A place where death echoes.

Indeed, far be it from any of us to rule out divine possibility.

And so it is that Ezekiel, moved as he is by the Spirit, is empowered by God to prophesy on God’s behalf. To boldly speak possibility where possibility appears very clearly to be long dead.

The Spirit is alive and working miracles THROUGH the people.

“You shall live.” Again.

And as Ezekiel prophesies, “suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.” The Spirit is capable of manifesting and moving quickly, AMEN!

And “there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them ...” And eventually there is breath in them – breath “from the four winds.” And the dry bones are dry bones no more – the breath of God’s spirit having come into them, they are able to live again, “a vast multitude.”

Spirit moving as wind, as breath, as new life.

Which brings us back to Pentecost. Again, when “suddenly from heaven,” there came “a sound like the sweeping of a mighty wind.”

The Spirit is capable of manifesting and moving quickly, AMEN! But we find the people gathered still unable to comprehend how it is that they are able to hear and understand, each in their native language.

Some turn cynical, which is what many of us do (right?) when we stop believing. When we lose faith and hope.

They mock what’s happened as a display of drunkenness, but Peter sets the record straight – literally beginning what would become and evolve as the Christian witness in the world. For better, and yes we know all too well, for worse.

Peter quotes the prophet Joel, speaking for the God who declares that “I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh ...” So that your children shall prophesy. And the young among you shall see visions. And the old among you shall dream dreams. And even those who are enslaved shall prophesy, those whose power has been stolen away from them EMPOWERED to claim their own freedom. Witnesses to the possibility and promise of JUSTICE in the face of their own experience of injustice and oppression. NEW life in the face of death, when new life is, by all accounts, impossible.

The Spirit alive and working miracles among and THROUGH the people. God’s Spirit alive and working miracles THROUGH God’s people, God’s beloved, God’s own.

Spirit enabling and empowering birth and rebirth, again and again and again. Still. In our lives and in the world around us.

Spirit moving as the wind of change, as the breath of new life, as the fire of transformation.

That is what we celebrate THIS Pentecost Sunday.

And so I say to you again, cheerleaders for love, prophetic Spirit-spreaders: "I got Spirit, yes I do! I got Spirit, how 'bout you!"

May it be so.