

“The Living Spirit Within”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 2, 2017

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Readings from Scripture: Romans 8:6-11 and Ezekiel 37:1-14

To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, God who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.

Romans 8:6-11

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all round them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, 'Mortal, can these bones live?' I answered, 'O Lord God, you know.' Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, 'Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely." Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of

Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. 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.'

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and our faith to you and to the power of your spirit. I pray that you would take the words that each of us carry within, our worries, our joys, all that we're consumed by. I pray that you would take the words that we offer in song and in prayer, the words we've heard read from scripture and the words that you have laid upon my heart to share this morning. Transform them all into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work within us, among us and through us as your people. Let us be encouraged by that word and comforted. Let that word challenge us and call us into service. Let that word speak what our heart needs and through our mouths what our neighbors need. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

Every now and then when I do a children's sermon, I sort of give the whole thing away—what I'm going to say when I get up here. But it's true; this week I had one of those moments, in reading this passage from Ezekiel, that made me stop and reexamine everything I've thought about what it means to be a prophet. I've spoken and preached before about prophets. I have the image, and I'm wondering if maybe you don't as well, that prophets are kind of people you want to stay a little farther away from—the kind of people that are crazed and have long hair and smell funny and are walking around with their Bibles ready to hit you anytime you need to be whacked back into shape. This is the kind of image of what I think a prophet is. And there is sort of the contemporary version, or maybe that is the contemporary version. I've said before that sometimes prophets are people who stand on corners with billboards and shout, “Repent, for the kingdom of God is near.” Again, I'm the kind of person if see someone standing there, I'm going across the street, around the block, in order to avoid them.

Even in New York City, but only a few weeks ago, my wife and I were out walking down the street and here comes someone with a backpack and a sign stuck into it. It looked like a yard sign stapled on there and, of course, it said, “Jesus, Lord and Savior. Repent for the kingdom is near.” And I'm like, you have got to be kidding me. They're still at it—these prophets. Prophets like Ezekiel who see a vision from God, who understand that God wants them to do a particular work and says, “Okay, Lord, I'll go do it,” in spite of the fact that none of you want a prophet to do a prophet's work in your midst, “But I'll go. I'll be the one. I'll speak your truth.” This is what I've always thought that a prophet does—hears from God, sees a vision and then in spite of the feelings, cares and concerns of the people, just barges in and does the work.

And then I read the second part of one verse in this passage—the 11th verse. The Spirit is saying to Ezekiel, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel,” again keeping with the vision of what the bones are all about. But then it says, “They say, the whole house of Israel says, 'our bones are dried up. Our hope is lost and we are cut off completely.'” And I thought that I would hear the passage differently if I started with that verse. If I started with a verse that said something like, “And the Lord God was paying attention to the people and noticed that they were saying, 'our bones are dried up and our hope is lost and we are cut off completely.'” And in the midst of that as the beginning, as the prelude, if you will, all the rest of it sounds a little bit different. To be honest, to me it sounds a little less crazy. If the people are convinced that their bones are dried up and their hope is lost and that they are completely cut off from God's blessing, then it makes sense that the

Lord God put a hand upon a prophet and brought them out into a valley full of bones that were very dry and said, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And then said to him, "Go, prophesy to these bones," to these people who are convinced that their bones are dry, their hope is lost, and they are cut off. "Go and say to them, who are convinced that I do not care and do not pay attention, go and say to them, who are convinced that I no longer love them, go and say to them, "I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and I will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you and you shall live and you shall know that I am the Lord your God." Go and say to the breath, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live."

So for a people who are convinced that God has abandoned them, that there is no hope, that their bones are dried up and they have been completely cut off, God says, "No. I have not given up on you. I will not give up on you. I am going to give you life. In the midst of your dryness, your despair and your feeling of exile and abandonment, I am the God of life."

And so I realized this week that this passage from Ezekiel is the perfect prelude for the next two weeks as we begin to turn more specifically towards Easter, to Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. The message we are being advised to think about is how God is going to open up the graves and to bring life out of the graves, how God will put God's Spirit within us and we shall live and plant us in our own place and that we will know that God is still acting, and more importantly, we will know that God is still God.

So after doing my Bible study on this passage, I needed to go to the store. As I go to Schnucks from where I live I go down Dougherty Ferry, past the UCC Church that has a big flag/banner in their front yard, it's a rainbow thing, you can't miss it even if you tried, and it says, "God is still speaking." And I thought to myself, "What would our flag say if we stuck one out on the corner?" God is still speaking, that's a nice affirmation. But if we let this passage inform us about what we want on our flag, I just want to offer some additional thoughts.

"God is still watching." Not bad but it sounds a little ominous at times, huh? How about "God is paying attention". God is renewing life in those who are convinced there is none. God is restoring hope. God is creating community. God is being God. God is still calling prophets. Again the last one may sound a little funny because of the whole idea of the prophet, but I realize if we are honest to the affirmations of this passage, we would have a really big flag with a lot of things on it, that we can affirm about the nature of our God. I think that the most important thing that the flag would say is what the cross tries to say to us and to everyone: Our God brings life out of death. This is the message of the prophet to the people of God who are convinced that they have no life, no hope and are completely abandoned. When you feel as if your faith is dead, I will bring you life. When you feel as if your life has no future, I will bring you life. When you feel that you are up against it and you don't know where to turn, I will bring you life. This is the God that we worship, the God who is at work in our lives and in our hearts.

The other thing that I've always thought about prophets is that they act alone. That they are the singular strange people who are called by God and who see visions and who go out and get things done and say weird stuff and people either love them or hate them.

I had the privilege on Friday to sit at Helen Anderson's bedside. I was there alone, sitting beside her as she was in her bed, labored breathing, clearly on her way out. We were at a sort of old-school nursing home, so the room had a sliding door looking out on the garden. I gave her a kiss

on the forehead, I made the sign of the cross and I whispered into her ear, "Go in peace. Your work is done." And then I sat down in the chair. And in the middle of offering prayer, I don't know why, but I snapped into awareness that there was a chair sitting next to me that was empty. When I came to that awareness, the next thought I had was that if I turned around I would see all of you sitting in chairs behind me, the congregation, the choir in their robes, all of us were sitting there. I wasn't alone with her, the church was present. I realized that if we understand the role of the prophet differently, that it's not just a crazed person who sees a vision and goes to do something, but that it's an attentive God calling people who are willing to say 'yes', to go tend to the actual needs of the people, then in a way we are all prophets, every time we do a faithful deed or a kindness or a goodness for another. When we show up and minister to that person in need, we are God's prophetic presence in the world. So the next time you see someone holding a sign, think twice. I know I have. Amen.