

## Can These Bones Live?

I love the Bible story we looked at earlier this morning. In it, God asks a question, and moves in three parts to answer it. He asks, “Can these bones live?” (Ezek. 37:3), and then starts moving to make it happen – connecting bone-to-bone, tendons and skin, and finally breathing breath into them. “Can these bones live?” What a question! Have we ever asked such a question before?

I have. Just last week. I’m not trying to be a “Negative Ned,” but friends, when you look out and only see 25 people sitting in the Sanctuary for worship on a Sunday morning, and you’ve spent hours putting together a sermon, it’s discouraging. “Can these bones live?” I hope so! Sometimes I wonder if a fresh set of eyes are needed from this angle to move us forward into the next phase of our life as a local church.

In Ezekiel’s story, the bones are “the people of Israel,” (verse 11). Perhaps in our story, they are the Church universal, our denomination, or contemporary corporations and governments. The question is worth asking of all institutions and systems: “Can these bones live?” I suspect the ancient church in Jerusalem was asking that question amongst themselves on Pentecost long ago, when the Holy Spirit came rushing in with a sound of a violent wind. If you have a Bible, or Bible app handy, turn with me to Acts 2:1-21. **Read Acts 2:1-21.**

## Pentecost

We often think of Pentecost as the birthday of the Church, but Pentecost was a holiday for the Jewish people long before the Church came to be. It was called the Feast of Weeks. It was a Jewish celebration to thank God for all He had done for them. They would go to Jerusalem to give offerings in the temple of their firstfruits. It’s pretty backwards from the way we do things. They gave to God the first of everything they grew and harvested, and then they kept the rest.

It’s where we get the idea of tithing from – except they gave the first and the best to God, and the leftovers were theirs to do with as they pleased. That’s what’s going on in the beginning of our passage. The apostles are in Jerusalem to give their firstfruits – their tithes – to God in the temple. Jesus had ascended into heaven ten days earlier, and had promised to send a helper to His followers.

The first thing we notice in the text is the way the Holy Spirit arrives. “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them,” (Acts 2:2-3). The first thing we notice is the wind – it’s a violent wind – I suppose much like a tornado. And then they notice tongues of fire.

I can think of two other instances in Scripture where God shows up in fire – when Moses saw the bush, which wasn't burned up, and when God led the people out of Egypt through the sea and into the wilderness in the pillar of cloud and fire.

## **Speaking in Other Tongues**

God spoke to the ancient church through their senses – hearing, seeing. Notice what happens next. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them,” (verse 4). There were lots of people in Jerusalem for the Feast of Weeks – giving the best of their livestock and harvests. Luke, the writer of Acts even states, “There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven,” (verse 5). In those days, it's hard to tell how many nations people knew of. They've found Chinese coins in ancient Greek and Egyptian temples, so we know there were trade routes established throughout Eurasia and Africa. Beyond that, who knows?

The Holy Spirit comes on the apostles, and they're speaking languages they had never spoken before. “When they [the God-fearing Jews] heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. Utterly amazed, they asked: ‘Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?’” (verses 5-8). I visited what my parents would call a “Holy Roller” church once. The pastor said it was prayer time, and assuming prayer is done the way we do it, I was shocked! As soon as I closed my eyes, everyone around me started chattering away – some people call it “speaking in tongues.” That's not what the Scripture is getting at here this morning.

It's not some “prayer language” like some of our more charismatic brothers and sisters get caught up in doing – the apostles were speaking actual languages that people in the crowd understood. And then Luke gives us a list of countries and languages that people were hearing spoken simultaneously by the apostles. “Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs – we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” (verses 9-11). If we were to look at a map, most of these locations are areas in Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa. It was basically the known world of their day.

## **Wonders of God**

What do you suppose “the wonders of God” being declared in their own tongues was? Luke doesn't explicitly tell us, but it's probably the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That's the best news the world has ever heard – and the Holy Spirit wants to make sure people know about it! God pours out His prevenient grace equally on the deserving and the undeserving, trying to draw people ever deeper into the

realization that they need to receive His justifying grace – which we receive only through the Crucified and Risen One.

People were dumbfounded. “What does this mean?” (verse 12), they asked. And then we start hearing about the critics. Friends, critics are a dime a dozen. They’re all over the place. You do something good, someone’s going to find something to nit-pick at you about it. That’s just human nature. There are a lot of “Negative Nellies,” and “Negative Neds” in the world – including yours’ truly!

“Some, however, made fun of them and said, ‘They have had too much wine,’” (verse 13). In other words, “Don’t pay attention to them – they’re drunk.” In today’s world, they might say, “they’re stoned,” “they’re high,” something like that. Well, leave it to Peter to set things straight!

### **Not Lining Up with Evidence**

“Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: ‘Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning!’” (verses 14-15). See, the whole drunkenness thing falls flat on its face when you think about it. If a person’s drunk – or high – would they be able to speak a language they’d never learned before and make sense to people who were native speakers of it? Of course not.

The accusation just doesn’t line up with the evidence. Peter goes on to explain what’s happening on that Pentecost day to the crowd, and to us today. He says:

This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ‘In the last days, God says, I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,’ (verses 16-21).

Peter realized the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – had been poured out on all people. I want to focus on this with the time we have left. There are some folks out there who have gone so far as to say the United Methodist Church is an apostate church. That’s a fancy, old-timey word that means we’ve stopped following Jesus Christ.

## **He Pours Out His Spirit on All People**

Today I'm here to tell you, though, friends, that we are following Jesus Christ – the Son of God – who was crucified for the sin of the world to bring divine redemption, restoration, and reconciliation to humanity, died, and was buried. On the third day He rose from the dead and will come again to judge the living and the dead. The United Methodist Church is following Jesus Christ. And, the United Methodist Church is staying true to its mission statement, “to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” The problem some folks have is that they think everyone should interpret the Bible the same way that they do with regards to people. It's been that way throughout history. Some folks thought slavery was a-okay, while others didn't. Some thought women shouldn't be in the pulpit, while others did. It goes on down the line – and some this stuff – slavery, women, and so on, is still disputed by certain groups even today.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism once wrote:

No man can choose for or prescribe to another. Everyone must follow the dictates of his own conscience in sympathy and sincerity. He must be fully persuaded in his own mind and then act according to the best light he has. Nor has any creature the power to constrain another to walk by his own rule. God has given no right to any of the children of men to lord it over the conscience of his brethren. Every wise man will allow another the same liberty of thinking which he desires they should allow him... he bears with those who differ with him... 'Tis certain, as long as we know in part, all men will not see all things alike. It is the unavoidable consequence of the present weakness and shortness of human understanding that we be of several minds, in religion as in common life. *Though we may not think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart though we are not of one mind?*

I'm not trying to tear anybody down – I'm just saying in most any human situation, there's more than one perspective. Different people have different points of view. Or, put another way, things are open to interpretation – and we base those interpretations on our reason, experiences, and traditions. I read this quote Peter brings up from Joel, and I start thinking. “I will pour out My Spirit on *all* people,” (verse 17). Not on some. Does it matter to God if the person's a man or a woman? Does it matter to Him if they're young or old? Does it matter if they're rich or poor? It seems to me that when He says He pours out His Spirit on all people, He makes it available to everyone. Men, women, young, old, rich, poor, gay, straight.

## **These Bones Will Live**

I have a hard time wrapping my head around all of it. I have biases – even prejudices – with which I've grown up. For a long time I went along with what I thought was the religious right. And over time, I've looked in the mirror at myself and have seen all my personal flaws. I've seen how much grace He's poured over me to clean me up

and get me to where I am right now as one of His followers. And when I look honestly in the mirror, and see a sinner looking back soaked in the blood and water that flowed from His side, I can't help but recognize that even in these weird situations that I don't understand, God's grace is desperately needed by another flawed person who actually looks a lot like me in the long-term.

God will use anyone to further the Gospel and the Kingdom, if they are willing to let Him use them, regardless of gender, age, wealth, health – you name whatever qualifier you want. If a heart is yielded to Him, He won't reject it. He loves us! And so, in closing, I want to circle back to that question I asked earlier. "Can these bones live?" That's for us, together, to decide.

Will we be bold in our faith, like Ezekiel, and "prophesy to the bones... prophesy to the breath"? Will we, through our actions and involvement in the lives of people in our community prove that the bones of the body of Christ can live? Are we, as a local church, bold enough to prophesy into the bones we face? Each of us – whether we know it or like it, or not – is a prophet. We're spokespeople for God; or as Paul says, "We are Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making His appeal through us," (2 Cor. 5:20). These bones will live! God has great things in store for us here, New Hope, but we have to be willing to step boldly into the future and do what He calls us to do – to make disciples for the transformation of the world.

**Prayer:** Creator Spirit and Giver of Life, Make the dry, bleached bones of our lives live and breathe and grow again as You did of old. Pour out Your Spirit upon the whole creation. Come in rushing wind and flashing fire to turn the sin and sorrow within us into faith, power, and delight. Amen.