

Pentecost!

Acts 2:1-21

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Pentecost is typically a day of celebration, with red and flames, noise and energy to rival the original story. In the Jewish tradition it was a festival to celebrate the end of the harvest, and we could explore what this could look like reinterpreted for today. It also came to be connected with the Law being given at Sinai and commentators caution against using this connection to "prove" Christianity's superiority over Judaism – another traditional temptation. However, in reflecting on the Pentecost story, I was quite taken with the Old Testament reading being that of the valley of the dry bones perhaps because it seems to be a parallel for where we find ourselves.

It must have been rather depressing for Ezekiel to look out on that valley. Here were the dried up remains of a people or an army. They had been left where they fell in the valley with no one to treat those bones with the dignity that human life deserved. These bones had been left in that state for a very long time.

They were desiccated. The scavenging animals had done their job of cleaning the flesh from the bones. Some would have the tooth marks from those hungry animals, bones would be separated from the rest of the body, taken back to a den to eat in safety or to feed the young. Later would come the smell – the putrefying smell of the dead, which is unforgettable for anyone who has experienced it. Finally, when there is nothing left for the maggots to eat, the sun would have dried out every last drop of moisture. These were the bones that Ezekiel saw. What hope was there for the people that these bones represented?

I suspect that most of us, had we been in Ezekiel's shoes, would have responded to Yahweh's questions with a variation of "you would have to be joking!" How on earth could these bones – dried, scattered, long-dead bones – be anything other than bones? How could they come to life again? Yet Ezekiel, whether with faith or resignation, responded that only God knew the answer to that question... and sure enough, the bones come back together.

However, something more than the physical body is needed – it is the Spirit of God being blown into these people that truly brings them to life. Initially when the bones are resurrected, there is no spirit/breath/wind in them. Ezekiel is told to prophesy for the spirit/breath/wind from the four corners of the earth to come and give life to these people; the end of the prophesy is that God will put God's spirit/breath/wind in the exiled people of Israel. Something more than simply existing is needed of the people. This is something that does not happen passively, but rather only happens when Ezekiel responds with the word calling the winds.

Looking at this story as a whole, there is an interesting feature of this particular vision of Ezekiel. His other three visions are all dated and it is possible to work out what else was going on at the time. This one has no external references. The Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate, Elie Wiesel has observed that Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dried bones bears no date because every *generation* needs to hear *in its own time* that these bones can live again. Like the exiles of old, we too can at times feel as good (rather, bad) as dead. We are null and void inside. But if we look through God's eyes, we can see broader realities, bases for hope. God can sustain us and fill our barren experiences with lively hope. Is it possible? ... look with God's vision and watch it happen.

We are not be facing anything as destructive as Ellie Wiesel or the Exiles, but I suspect from what I have heard people saying we are facing our own dry bones moment. Will we give up on the dry bones? Or will we respond to the movement of the Spirit to find fresh life in our time and place?

Next week we will be doing an "asset mapping" exercise – a time thinking of what we do have as a church community and how we can use this in different ways to connect to the people of this area. Will we look at what we do have and decide we would rather be dry bones, or will we take the risk to move with the Spirit and look to new life?

As you contemplate these questions, I am going to finish with a prayer/poem I wrote for the Uniting Church's national "Uniting in Prayer," a daily prayer cycle that runs from Pentecost to the anniversary of the Uniting Church (and let me encourage you to join in this national activity).

Wind of the Spirit

Imagine.

Imagine the blowing of the wind,
the cool breath of God,
washing over your body and soul;
reviving your spirit,
breathing into your being –
breath –
life.

Imagine.

Imagine the flowers dancing on the hillside,
and tall trees swaying in the breeze,
responding to that breath
like ballerinas who gracefully
spin and leap on the stage.

Imagine.

Imagine the cool breeze
blowing for thousands of kilometres
across the oceans
bringing songs of other countries
towards our shores
and mixing with the hot winds of our deserts
until they are united into one.

Imagine.

Imagine the Spirit of God inside you,
as close as your breath,
inspiring life,
rescue breaths:
CPR from God.

Imagine.

Imagine that new life
and all the possibilities it brings;

a new and different future
unimaginable in the past.

Breathe.

Breath and say with me:
Thanks be to God.