

Can These Bones Live?" **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

Holy Spirit

Today is the day of Pentecost. On Monday, my friends from Boston visited me and would like to see our church. They were impressed with our Pentecost symbol over here and a beautiful and well-maintained sanctuary. I didn't expect that this powerful symbol of Holy Spirit would be there at the sanctuary on Monday so when I saw it, I felt the presence of the Spirit and that moment reminds me that we can encounter Holy Spirit at an unexpected moment in an unexpected place, even in a place like death.

We, United Methodists, believe that "The Holy Spirit is God's present activity in our midst. When we sense God's leading, God's challenge, or God's support or comfort, we say that it's the Holy Spirit at work." When you sense something sacred or extraordinary in your ordinary, pause for a moment and listen to the whisper of the Holy Spirit.

The word for Spirit is ruha in Hebrew, which also refers to wind, and breath. So Spirit, wind, and breath are nearly the same in Hebrew. The same is true in Greek. The word 'Pneuma' means 'breath' or 'soul.' Ruha, the breath, is essential for life.

Ancient Christians use these words to describe God's activity among them. God is surely doing something but it was like God's breath, like a sacred wind. It could not be seen or held. Also, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (John 3:8). We don't have control of God's activities. We don't have an exclusive claim of it. Rather, God has claimed us and God leads us.

Ruah led Ezekiel to a place of death

In today's scripture, ruha, the Spirit of the Lord, brings Ezekiel to a valley of very many dry bones. Breath is essential for life and now the same Spirit of life brings Ezekiel to the Valley of Dry Bones. I wonder why the Spirit of life bring him to a place of death. The Spirit of life brings him to the very place of death because without honestly facing the reality of death, there is no chance of new life, but only death.

I believe that we are still shocked by a tragic school shooting, Uvalde, Texas. In a way to express our solidarity with all victims and their families, Asbury UMC has erected a memorial for victims. I really appreciate to Jan Jones and Andrea Dunn to take the labor to make this meaningful memorial. Unfortunately, on Tuesday, I received an email from the City of Warwick, requesting to remove this memorial from the island because it belongs to the city. My first reaction was that the City of Warwick works so hard to check every detail in our town so they know what's on this small island. I am disappointed by the city's request but at the same time, try to understand that there need some rules to run a city. So I and my mother moved chairs to our property and Jan recreated a beautiful and meaningful memorial place.

About an hour later, Lori, the church secretary, sent me email that she received a phone call from an irate neighbor regarding the memorial. "She said she didn't call the city to have it removed, but now she's mad that it is on our property!" As I read until that part, I assumed that someone must be very upset because we removed it from a good location to be seen. But next sentence struck me hard. "She demanded to know how long we were going to keep it up because

it's traumatizing her. She doesn't think that our local children should have to see the memorial either." Then, I realized how naïve I was. I thought that at least everyone would mourn together on this unspeakable tragedy. I naively believe that it's our human nature that we feel compassion for those who are grieving. But that was my mistake. A Korean poet said, "our compassion is as short as a shadow at noon, our shame as long as a shadow at midnight." Do you know how long a shadow is at noon? Very short. Do you know how long a shadow is at midnight? None! Since I do not know the life context of our neighbor, I would not judge her. But I don't agree with her opinion that our local children should not see the memorial. We cannot heal our wounds unless we realize that we are not well. There is no chance of new life without facing the reality of evil, no matter how painful it is. Maybe that's why the Spirit of life brings Ezekiel to the place of suffering and death. In the same way, I believe that God wants us to be honest about the dry bones of our reality and face the truth.

When a mass shooting happened, some people always blame mental health issues for gun violence. But do people with mental health issues only in the United States? Some Koreans struggle with mental health issues. Some Japanese struggle with mental health issues. Canada, U.K. Germany, France... all these countries also have people with mental health issues. But they don't have school shootings. Why? Because guns are not readily available. We must face and accept that we have a gun culture problem. In 2020, about forty-five thousand people died by guns. Death is all around us. It's hard to face the reality of suffering and evil. We don't want to see death. We don't want it. But the Spirit of God, the breath of life leads us to the valley of death for new life.

Can These Bones Live?

The same Spirit of the Lord who want Ezekiel to face dry bones in a valley of death, wants us to do the same in faith. Just like Ezekiel, we see dem bones everywhere. The Lord asks Ezekiel, "Son of man, can these bones live?" The same God asks us "can these bones live?" What would you say? We may want to say "Amen." But the truth is that resurrections don't come easily. Changing a culture of death seems almost impossible. For decades after Sandy hook elementary school shooting, nothing has changed. After Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, nothing has really changed. One after one another... the same thing happened and nothing really changed. Dem dry bones of the victims slain by gun violence have been around us for many decades and we see the numbers of them increasing every day. "Can these bones live?" Do you think gun culture in the United States can be changed? In the midst of this struggle between the breath of life and dem bones, we don't know how long it will take a time for dry bone to be raised. We don't know if the culture of death in our society would ever be changed. One thing for sure is that we have to go through a valley of death in order to reach life and resurrection.

Only God knows if the bones can live but we are still called to speak up. God ordered Ezekiel, "Prophecy over these bones: 'Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!'" "I'm bringing the breath of life to you and you'll come to life. I'll attach sinews to you, put meat on your bones, cover you with skin, and breathe life into you. You'll come alive and you'll realize that I am God!" So we are called to proclaim the message of life and hope.

On Wednesday, the church council had an emergency meeting to discuss about our stance on a gun violence and a memorial we elected to show our solidarity with victims of recent school shootings. While we listen to one another and respect differences, we also agree that as Christians, the life and teaching of Jesus Christ is our guiding principle and loving God and loving our neighbors and enemy should be a fundamental ground for dealing with these difficult issues. We as the church acknowledge the problem of gun culture in our society and by following 2016 book of resolutions #3428, we demand and support more just gun law that prevents or reduce gun violence. I believe this is where the Spirit is leading us today.

As a fire is meant for burning

Today is the Day of Pentecost. We talked about wind and breath as the primary metaphor for the Holy Spirit. However, there is another metaphor for the Spirit of the Lord. That is a fire. As a fire, the Holy Spirit cast out darkness and radiate the warmth. The Holy Spirit reveals what's hidden in our plain sight and shows inequity and evil in our world.

As the church caught up with a divine flame of the Spirit, we are meant to brighten the darkness and give warmth to those who find no place of rest in this violent world. We should be a comforting place as people are going through a time of grief. A hymn's lyrics beautifully describe what we need to do as a church. "As a fire is meant for burning with a bright and warming flame, so the church is meant for mission, giving glory to God's name. Not to preach our creeds or customs but to build a bridge of care, we join hands across the nations, finding neighbors everywhere."

As breath of life blows into us, a small flame in us would be a great fire that cast out darkness and give comfort for those who mourn. If we are able to breathe in and breathe out the breath, it means the Spirit of the Lord is still with us. Deeply inhale the breath of God and prophesy over bones in the valley of death. Bones, dry bones will live again because death cannot stop the breath of God. So breathe in the breath of God and breathe out the breath of life. Proclaim the good news! May the breath of life reignite and grow the divine flames in us. Amen.