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**“Dem Bones”  
A sermon by Mindy Douglas**

**Day of Pentecost (Year B)  
May 20, 2018  
Ezekiel 37:1-4, Acts 2:1-21, Romans 8:22-27**

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I have no doubt that I am one of the very few preachers this Pentecost Day venturing into a sermon on a text other than the second chapter of Acts. After all, Acts 2 describes the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those gathered for the Feast of the Pentecost. The story is theatrical, to say the least, and includes tongues of fire, the rush of a mighty wind, and multiple languages being spoken and understood all at once. It is the traditional story for the beginning of the church and is the one read most often on Pentecost. I hope you have heard it before and perhaps even know it well, as it is an important part of our church story, but it is not the passage on which I will preach today.

Today’s passage takes us back hundreds of years from that early church story of Acts, back to the year 597 B.C.E (before the common era), about two thousand six hundred and fifteen years from today. It was awhile ago. 😊

It is an absolutely horrible time in Israel’s history. The ridiculously strong nation of Babylon easily conquers Jerusalem and throws the Israelites into exile in Babylon. Ten years later, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon comes in a rage to

finish what had been started. He leaves Jerusalem in a “smoldering rubble” and captures and blinds the Israelite’s king.<sup>1</sup> The war was horrible. Think of the worst war you have ever heard of or seen and it was like that. Bodies strewn across fields after horrendous fighting with no way out and no way home.

During this time God calls Ezekiel to be a prophet to this war-ravaged people trapped in darkness and despair, a refugee people far away from their homeland, who feel abandoned by God, and who have lost all hope. In our passage for today Ezekiel receives a vision from God. As professor John Holbert says, “the vision begins in a nightmare.”<sup>2</sup>

God sits Ezekiel smack down in the middle of a valley full of bones. It makes me think of the elephant graveyard in the Disney movie *The Lion King*.<sup>3</sup> The land is gray and black, lit only by the sun-bleached bones scattered all around in the dust

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<sup>1</sup> John Holbert, *Patheos*, “Becoming Whole Again,” April 6, 2014, <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/becoming-whole-again-john-holbert-03-31-2014.html>, (assessed May 18, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> [http://jadensadventures.wikia.com/wiki/The\\_Elephant\\_Graveyard](http://jadensadventures.wikia.com/wiki/The_Elephant_Graveyard)



and dirt, dry and brittle. Death is everywhere you look. God leads Ezekiel through this valley of death until he has seen it all and then God asks, “Mortal, can these bones live?” Surely God does not expect an answer to this obviously rhetorical question, so Ezekiel responds, “You know, Lord.”

God’s response showed Ezekiel that God did indeed know exactly whether or not those bones could live. “Prophecy to the bones,” he tells Ezekiel. “Tell them to listen to me. I will fill them with breath, lay sinews upon them, and cause flesh and skin to cover them. They will live and know that I am the Lord!”

In his vision, Ezekiel doesn’t say, “What? Are you crazy?!” Ezekiel doesn’t turn and stomp off through the bones exasperated at the ridiculousness of God’s request. He does it. He does what God says. He talks to that valley of death and tells that extensive pile of bones what God told him to tell them. “Listen to God, you pile of bones. God is going to breathe life into you. God is going to put you all

back together, bone upon bone, and put sinew and flesh upon you.” And then Ezekiel stands back and watches as God does just that.<sup>4</sup>

But there was no breath yet, just fully reformed bodies, so God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath – the word in Hebrew is *ruach*, meaning wind, breath, and spirit. “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.” And so he did and they stood on their feet before him, a vast, living multitude.

Then God tells Ezekiel what, by then, should have been clear: “these bones are the whole house of Israel.” In their pain, despair, and distress, in their exile, they have said, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost.” Prophesy to them and tell them that they are not cut off from me. I am going to bring them back to the Land of Israel. I will open your graves and bring you up from your graves. I will put my spirit within you and you shall live.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.sourpussclothing.com/dancing-skeletons-and-friends-matches.html>



That which was dead will be alive again.

That which was lost will be found.

That which was had been despairing, will be filled again with hope.

The spirit will come – like breath, like wind from the four corners of the earth, *ruach*, and you will live again.

This is what Pentecost is all about. The Spirit breathing new life into that which was dead. Breathing joy to that which was full of sorrow. Breathing peace into places of war. Breathing comfort into places of despair and pain.

What are the dry places in your life? What are the ways you feel cut off from home, cut off from God, or cut off from the world? What are the places in your life which feel breathless, spiritless?

God calls Ezekiel to remind the people that they are not alone. They are not on their own, and that life is ahead by the power of God's Spirit.

I think the Day of Pentecost comes as a reminder of this to us as well. Pentecost reminds us of God's power to bring life out of death, to make dry bones dance, and to make something out of nothing, to fill us with breath and with the Spirit - even in the dry places of my life – even in the dry places of yours.

Pentecost also reminds us of our call as the church to, as Holbert says, “focus our attention on the mystery and majesty of YHWH who knows no death that cannot be infused with life. Whatever this day means, it surely celebrates this

fact; the church is in the business of offering life in the middle of a death-dealing culture.”<sup>5</sup>

And we are. We embrace the gift of the Spirit for ourselves and we offer this gift of God to others. We are in the business of offering the life and hope of God’s Spirit when war, violence, anger, fear, and despair seek to take it away. We are in the business of shining Christ’s light into the dark places, like Santa Fe, Texas or Gaza. We are in the business of being the voice for God’s peace in these places and around the world. We are in the business of working for justice for our children, for the elderly, for the poor, for those who are persecuted, and for all who are lost, alone, and despairing. Anyone who says, “my bones are dried up; my hope is lost” needs to hear that God is the God of life and hope, breath and miracles. The angel Gabriel once said to Mary, “Nothing is impossible with God,” and Pentecost reminds us this is so.

So fill us this day like rushing wind, O Spirit, O Holy Breath. By God’s grace, these bones can live. Amen.

*Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.*

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<sup>5</sup> John Holbert, *Patheos*, “We Rattling Bones: Reflections on Ezekiel 37:1-14 for Pentecost,” May 15, 2015, <http://www.patheos.com/progressive-christian/2015/05/we-rattling-bones-john-c-holbert-05-15-2015>, (accessed 4-18-18).