

Sermons at Christ Church

Be a Joyful Gift to Others.

Pentecost

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“Mortal, can these bones live?” Asked the Lord. “O Lord God, you know.” Ezekiel responded. Lord God, I do not know. You are the one who knows. Within this vision, the prophet sees the scattered bones in the valley. But the prophet is not in any position to know whether these bones can live or if there’s any possibility of life in them. The prophet doesn’t know God’s people can be restored.

This vision situates us in the exilic period where the people of Israel had been uprooted from their homeland and were languishing in exile. The vision reflects the hopelessness of the people of God—they were like disjointed skeletons. Their song was one of lament. That same sense of hopelessness and desolation is shared by Boney M’s rendition of Psalm 137.

By the rivers of Babylon

Where we sat down,

And there we wept

When we remembered Zion.

Although we cannot sing the song of Zion in a strange land,

Let the words of our mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight.

In the vision, the prophet defers to the Lord God with these words “O Lord God, you know.” This is a tacit admission that mortals do not have answers to existential questions. However, that doesn’t also mean that we are left clueless and hopeless or unable to bring life to the broken and darkened places of human existence. The bones can live. There’s life in those bones—but someone has to speak that life into them. Someone has to pronounce life into them and thankfully, those who can and do speak life into those dry bones aren’t special people, they are folks like you and me who simply

count on the grace and mercy of God. Listen to Paul, if I want to boast, let me boast of the Lord and His grace on me.

I wish I knew how I got here and to share this blessed and lovely occasion with you. Today is Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit lighted on the disciples. I also celebrate the 25th anniversary of telling the story of God's love.

Like the prophet Ezekiel, I did not know if the dry bones within me had any life in them. But one thing I know is that God prophesied life into those bones. And for me, it has always been about the God who picks us up, cleanses us and restores us with such an incredible purpose. It has always been about the God who recognizes our hopelessness and our famished lives. It has always been about the God who restores us and provides us with more than enough reason to believe in the human story-that however, dry the bones may be, however scattered the bones may be, however disjointed the bones in the valley may be, however strewn the bones may be, it is God that puts all our lives together and blesses us with purpose.

For me, the purpose has always been about picking up the pieces, telling a humble story that reflects the very notion of human dependency on God, human insufficiency, human brokenness, human decency, human contingency, the possibilities that abound and the absolute responsibility we owe, not to ourselves alone, but to each other, especially the least among us-the homeless, the addict, the destitute, the poor, the refugee and the sick. Those who feel abandoned by God and those who feel that the good news isn't good enough for them.

One of my favorite priest was a Chaplain at Adisadel College. The Anglican Boy's school that I attended for seven years with many of our worshippers here today. I got to know him and served him as an altar boy throughout my teens. He was the kind of priest that was an epitome of human brokenness. But I think a lot of people didn't understand him because their idea of a priest was one who exemplified holiness-but holiness is an illusion. His was one of fidelity to brokenness, and the real impact of his ministry on me was that he wasn't shy about his need for redemption and our collective need for redemption.

He was to me like the broken bones scattered in the desert-waiting to be put back together, not by the favor of another man or woman but by the One who rescues each of us and gives us purpose. The One without whom life loses its meaning and essence.

I learned from him that whereas holiness is an illusion, faithfulness isn't. Faithfulness is about authenticity-being who you are at all times, embracing the power of integrity that doesn't condemn nor is judgmental.

It is a kind of power that doesn't look at life as a crossword puzzle to be solved but always looks at life as an opportunity for mending, healing, forming, shaping, directing and nurturing. This power believes that none of us is a finished product, each is a work in progress. And each work, however untidy as it may be, tells a story of a glorified God who continues to dwell in and among the broken.

For where would we be if God didn't dwell among us-the broken? Where would we be if God simply looked on our hopelessness and only felt dissatisfied by it? But God acted. The dissatisfaction at the sight of the dry bones scattered in the valley is similar to the dissatisfaction Jesus saw on the face of the disciples. Jesus knew their potential. But did they know their potential?

In the gospel story, the disciples are stunned into silence when they heard Jesus's farewell message. They simply did not know what to do or what to say. Where do we go from here? They wondered. Being very much aware of the desperation of the disciples, Jesus promises them that they wouldn't be left alone, the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Advocate, the Paraclete, which literally means walking alongside, will come, dwell with them, walk alongside them and lead them into all truth. The Paraclete leads us into three truths.

First, the truth into which the Paraclete leads the disciples and us-the spiritual descendants of those disciples, has never been about absolutism-because the good news of Jesus Christ isn't about absolutes. If it were about absolutes, there was no way that people from many different tongues and languages could hear the apostles speak in their native languages. If it was about absolutes, we wouldn't have heard Paul proclaim that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, male or female, for all are one in Christ.

Second, it is about the in-breaking of God into human experience. The God who took human flesh and was crucified, not because of a crime he committed but because he told a story about God's love which was too rich to be true, a story about God's grace which was too sacred to behold, a story about God's purpose for each which was too accessible to be ignored and a story about freedom which was too liberating for those who held others in bondage. He told a story to a people who were manipulated to reject the idea that God had a different story for them. God always has an empowering story for you and for each of us. Can you believe the story that God has for you?

Third, it is about a God, essence, if you may call it, who has no need for us-you and I, but yet initiates and triggers you and me into existence. And empowers us for a purpose greater than ourselves.

And that all that we do, big or small should manifest the glory of the risk God took in breathing life into us. That was the amazing feeling the disciples found out after they began to proclaim the gospel to both strangers and foes. They realized that there is power in the gospel-it sets people free because those who are free recognize the divine presence in everyone. And not only that, but those who are free are empowered to testify to the freedom they have in God and the life they have in God.

Here's a story for you. A preacher wanted to know what his teenage son would be in his future life. So, he thought he would give his son a test. He put on his son's dresser a bible, and if the boy took the bible, it meant, he would be a preacher. Then he put a silver dollar by the bible, which meant he would be a banker. Then he put a bottle of whiskey and if he took that it meant he's going to be a worthless drunk. The last thing was a playboy magazine and if he took that he's going to be a womanizer. The preacher hid in the closet waiting for his teenage son to come in. The teenage son came in, saw the four items, picked them all up and carried them out. And the father said, dear God, the boy's going to run for congress.

"Mortal, can these bones live?" The Lord's question to the prophet shouldn't be lost on us. The desperation we see in our lives, our communities and our world makes us wonder, if there can be life in those weary bones. But I tend to ask the same question in a different way, do you see a potential? Do you see any type of soil in which you can plant a seed and nurture it to grow?

On the day of Pentecost, a fisherman stood up and spoke to a crowd in a way that he had never spoken before. Some of his hearers thought he was drunk-with scotch or gin or rum, I don't know.

Thank God that you and I, our ministries and our common life are a living testimony of that speech. Pentecost is about believing that each bone has life in it, each bone has a potential. I pray that you never underestimate the power of small beginnings. May you believe in the potential of each person, each bone. Do not only believe that each bone can have life in it, but rely on the Holy Spirit to speak life into each bone.

Amen.