

Pentecost Sunday  
June 4, 2006

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*Scriptures: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15*

I have a very vivid memory of a certain episode of the Lawrence Welk Show, for those of you who remember what that was. It was a Halloween show where some of the guys dressed up in skeleton outfits and sang the song, “Dem Bones, dem bones, dem dry bones,....” It was a catchy, upbeat tune, that I only later learned was a Gospel tune based on today’s text from Ezekiel.

This passage, the story of Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones has become one of my favorites. Ezekiel was a prophet to the people of Israel during the time of their exile into Babylon. The Israelites had been taken away from their country to be slaves in a foreign land. They had lost all that was precious to them: family, freedom, and their homeland. And not just for a few years. By the time of Ezekiel, they had been in exile for more than seventy years. Some of them knew nothing but hopelessness. They had lived their entire lives feeling abandoned by God, and hopeless.

Into this situation comes this vision, given to Ezekiel: a valley, full of bones, very dry bones. And God asks, “Can these bones live?” My hunch is that Ezekiel probably was thinking, “No, no way.” But he had the good sense to say, “O Lord, you know.” And then there was a wind, and a rattling, until lo and behold there was bone on bone, and flesh, and breath, and life again. The point to Ezekiel was these are the people of Israel, whose situation now appears to be hopeless. But that is not the end of the story. Watch and see what is possible. Watch and see what I will do.

Hopelessness seems to be part of the human condition. And bringing dry bones to life seems to be God’s specialty. That’s the point of this vision. That was the essence of the resurrection. In a slightly different way, it was what happened on the Day of Pentecost, as the disciples were waiting in Jerusalem, feeling alone and uncertain.

Until the day when there was a wind, and fire, and the miracle of understanding, breaking the barrier of language, showing them the way forward, a future, the mission to proclaim Christ, to baptize, and to create Christian community. God took their uncertainty, and hopelessness and formed the Church, a human-as-can-be organization, beset by sin and error and shortcomings from Day One. But still the group that has proclaimed Christ crucified and raised from the dead for two millennia. The ones who have invited other people into baptized life as part of a community of people who live lives believing God can make dry bones live.

Which is a good thing by the way. That God can make dry bones live. Just look around, at the world and its war and violence, read the papers and see the greed and corruption, or just look out our front door and see the poverty, injustice and addiction. Valleys and valleys and valleys of dry bones. Some days I think to myself, “Can these bones live?” I shake my head and say, with Ezekiel, “Oh, Lord, you know.”

Other days, I read about someone or something, or I get a chance to be involved in some project (like building a brick house) or I have the privilege of being part of someone

else's journey, and I am reminded once again, that yes, "dem dry bones" do indeed live. Can these bones live? To the core of my being I know again the answer is, "Yes. Yes, Lord, yes they can." In fact, today is one of those days, because in a few minutes, Cindi Ruiz is going to be baptized.

Some of you have gotten to know Cindi a little bit. And, in the days ahead, I hope more of you will get to know her even better. She has given me permission to say a few things about her journey to this point in time. Suffice it to say that hers has been a particularly long and arduous journey to the font of God's grace.

Along the way there have been plenty of "dry bones" kinds of times when people might have seen her walking down the street and thought to themselves, "There's no hope for people like that. Nothing is ever going to change. Truth be told, there were times along the way when Cindi thought pretty much the same thing.

Only God didn't think so. God knew. God knew the dry bones of her life could live again. I think it is fair to say that over the last few years, the breath of God has been blowing through her life, and the bones have been rattling, and setting bone on bone, and flesh has appeared such that she is here today, prepared to be baptized, prepared to grow into that life of faith and community and service to which all the baptized are called. I rejoice to witness this day, what God can do, to be part of this baptism and see the Spirit moving in this woman's life, to see dry bones live.

Now, there is one last thing I want to leave us with, a reminder that being baptized isn't magic. It doesn't make life perfect, it doesn't make us perfect people. There are all kinds of ways to talk about what baptism does do, what baptism means. Some folks talk about living wet, live life remembering your baptism, remembering that you are a child of God, claimed, loved, forgiven, empowered by the Holy Spirit to live the life to which God calls you. But recently I read a little story about how we who are baptized can live a "Keep your fork" life.

It seems there was a woman who was terminally ill. Her Christian faith enabled her to speak forthrightly with her pastor about her own funeral arrangements. She had preferences about all kinds of things, music and readings, flowers and pallbearers. She wanted her Bible to be buried with her. At the end of all these arrangements she told her pastor, "Oh yes, one more thing. I want you to put a fork in my hand."

Needless to say, the pastor was a bit confused so she went on to explain how at every church dinner and potluck, as the dishes were being cleared, that whenever there was a dessert, maybe a chocolate cake, or pie, someone would lean over and quietly say, "Keep your fork" Keep your fork, because something more, something special, is still coming.

That is the promise we live. That's the promise God makes with us in this everlasting covenant in baptism. Whatever has been, whatever may yet befall us in the days to come, the best is yet to be. Whether in this life, or in the life to come, God has promised us life, abundant life, everlasting life. That is what makes us bold in the face of adversity. That is what makes us patient in suffering. That is what makes us joyful, and hope-full. No matter how many dry bones are in the valley.

Keep your fork, Cindi. The best is yet to be. Amen.