

Pentecost Sermon – Hannah Marshall

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

The hand of YHWH was upon me, and it carried me away by the Spirit of YHWH and set me down in a valley—a valley full of bones. God made me walk up and down among them. And I saw that there was a vast number of bones lying there in the valley, and they were very dry. God asked me, “Mere mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “Only you know that, Sovereign YHWH.”

Ezekiel wrote this prophecy (which I read from The Inclusive Bible) at a time of great sorrow, both for himself and his nation. He, along with around 10,000 other Jewish people were taken captive to live lives of exile. Ezekiel never returned home to Jerusalem. He knew exactly what it was like to be stripped of all life—his home, his call to the priesthood—and to stand empty handed, wondering how such dry bones could live. How could a people who had lost everything call the turmoil of their days “living”?

The UN reports that there are currently 65,600,000 forcibly displaced people worldwide. The turmoil of exile is the daily experience for **millions**. Somalis flee the war and unstable government in their homeland only to find their vast numbers have overwhelmed humanitarian aid, and they face the same poverty in exile that they experienced in Somalia. In Palestine, seventy years after the first Arab-Israeli war, millions of Palestinians still live in exile from the homes their families held for generations. Venezuelans face a collapsed economy at home and the resentment of neighboring countries if they leave in search of a better life. Over five million Syrians have moved their families to safer countries, but even as they desire safety for their children, they mourn the loss of their culture and often face discrimination in their new lives. Exile from one’s homeland isn’t the only way people experience a living death. Poverty and homelessness. Domestic violence. Hate crimes. Brutal police forces. How do we live with the sorrow of the world and not let it crush us?

One option is to become numb to these statistics, to listen to the morning news, and respond glibly, “How horrible!” before moving along to our next daily task. To protect ourselves, we grow apathetic to the hurting world. But is there another course of action, one which is less callous and more indicative of the kind of love we see in Christ’s life? A way we can embrace the pain we experience, the pain of those around us, and find paths into new life?

The key to life for the oppressed and wayward people in Ezekiel focuses around breath and spirit. Ezekiel emphasizes that even with all physical restoration complete, the corpses had no life in them until breath—spirit—entered them. Verse 14 says, *I will put my **spirit** within you, and you shall **live**.*

This Spirit is who we’re celebrating today: the Spirit of life, the Spirit without whom there **is** no life, the Spirit who binds all people together in common experience, in the mundane acts of daily life, in joy and in suffering, and who, if we’re paying attention, will show us our great commonality, from which we must learn to love and aid our fellows.

I remember a time in college when I expected the Spirit to speak to me in a very direct way. I attended a conservative Christian college where on occasion students would speak in tongues, and on a regular basis, students would use language like, “God spoke to me about the subject for my paper,” “I think God’s telling me I should be a business major,” or, “It’s God’s will that we should date.” (I had that last one used on me. Interestingly, when he broke up with me, he used the same excuse.) So I wondered, *why am I not hearing these clear, direct messages from the Spirit? I could use a little help, here!* College didn’t agree with my nature. I had no space to be alone and no family to help me feel safe and loved, so I became depressed and stayed that way through most of my four years of undergrad. I looked around my dorm, and I saw a bunch of fun-loving, happy-go-lucky young adults, and I was convinced I was the only one experiencing pain. I felt completely alone. Helpless. Finally, in my senior year, I started taking an antidepressant. It took me that long to start medication because I was waiting for **the Spirit** to tell me what to do. *Should I increase my exercise routine, God? Or eat all organic? Maybe I should be spending more time on my devotionals?* It’s like my Grandpa would tell us, “You don’t need a psychologist. You need spiritual counsel from a pastor.” I struggled along, thinking that if my faith was real enough, I’d get a message straight from the source that would fix this pit-of-my-stomach, jump-out-a-window pain.

The problem is, there’s no truth in the idea that God’s Spirit is going to send a telegraph to my soul to let me know which health food to eat, which Bible verse to read, to cure my depression. No, God’s Spirit **is** within us and does aid us in our lives, but we can’t forget to use our brains—and, when necessary, pharmacopoeia. The Spirit speaks truth, but it’s not a what-should-I-write-my-paper-on, who-should-I-date kind of truth. In our reading from Acts this morning, we hear, *God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh...And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.* So... what does the Spirit in us declare to us?

It’s certainly not a simple, happy story. It sounds to me more like a warning, a reminder of the turmoil that we experience here on earth. It’s not so much a remedy for pain as it is a revelation of pain. This makes sense to me, as I consider the young woman in college with depression. There was a remedy there for her in a pill; what she needed from the Spirit was a reminder that pain is a universal experience, that she is not alone. And for those of us who are not currently in pain, the Spirit helps open our eyes to the pain of those around us. This is the Spirit’s work of binding us all together, the Spirit poured out on all flesh. Just as in Ezekiel, all the dry bones are brought new life through the Spirit, in Acts, all people are given the Spirit.

I wonder, what does God mean by **all**? All educated, middle-class Americans? Of course not. All people who play by society’s rules and stay in their predetermined “place”? No. Then, does it mean all Christians? The original text comes from Joel. It predates Christianity, so it can’t mean all Christians, and *all flesh* was not talking about “all Jews,” either. Verse 18 reads, *Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.* The text specifically names slaves and women in order to include the most socially unacceptable people as also receiving the Spirit.

So then, is the Spirit a gift given only to some? Or is the Spirit truly given to us all, regardless of ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, even religion? I believe so.

And it is this all-embracing Spirit which binds us eternally to all people around us. Not just the neighbors we like, but also the ones who scare us because they don't seem to value what we value, be it a tidy yard or a certain set of socio-political viewpoints. Not just the people who are responsible stewards of the earth, but those who couldn't care less about islands of trash floating on ocean currents. The outcast, the dirty, the annoyingly talkative, the racist, the war-mongers. All. All. Each vessel, filled with the Spirit, filled with fire and prophecy.

If prophecy is as common as all that, it is the common prophecy of the human condition: life sucks, then you die. Not exactly a happy story but a true one. There are lots of true stories. Here's another one.

In 1208, a daughter was born to a wealthy family in Germany. She was well bred and had a healthy, happy childhood, as far as anyone could tell. She wanted for nothing, and didn't need to worry about worldly comforts. But something in her cried out in pain, cried in the voices of all those around her who worried from day to day how they would eat, how they would have the resources to care for their families. And in the voices of the sick, the dying, the irreparably broken. So this young woman—her name was Mechthild of Magdeburg—was not satisfied with her comfortable life. She had a vision of “all things in God, and God in all things.” In 1235, mid-life, she left her family to serve as a laywoman in a community that was part of the Beguines. The Beguines are sometimes credited as starting the first ever women's movement. Its members lived separate from others, sometimes building up whole cities from which they served the hurting. They had their own chapels and hospitals, and a woman need not take any special vows to be a member. She could join the Beguines for whatever amount of time she needed, as long as she followed the community's rules of chastity, poverty, and good works.

In her book Women in Praise of the Sacred, Jane Hirshfield writes of the Beguines, “A widow might build herself a house within a Beguinage, enter it with only a few cooking utensils and a simple, nunlike habit, and remain there for the rest of her life, first caring for others, later being cared for. Or a young woman might enter a preexisting communal house and remain for a year or two within the community, later leaving to rejoin her family or perhaps to marry.” In other words, Beguine communities were a place where single women could live independent, dignified lives, at a time when men held all the power.

Mechthild chose to become a member here not out of any personal need but because she understood the soul-deep connection she had with those around her who suffered. She spent her time as a Beguine caring for the other women in her community and doing what she considered her greatest ministry: recording her religious insights. Her writing survived in a collection called The Flowing Light of the Godhead. Here is one poem from this collection:

Effortlessly,
Love flows from God into man,
Like a bird
Who rivers the air

Without moving her wings.
 Thus we move in His world,
 One in body and soul,
 Though outwardly separate in form.
 As the Source strikes the note,
 Humanity sings—
 The Holy Spirit is our harpist,
 And all the strings
 Which are touched in Love
 Must sound.

We are the strings of the Spirit's harp. We are all bound together in one great song, each of us no more than one small note. If we can sound out the love we know through Christ, the song can be beautiful, even in the midst of suffering.

Here we are, in community together this morning. We have, for the most part, taken no formal vows, and all are welcome to sit among us, to commune with us in the Spirit. To eat potluck with us. What good works have we yet to complete for those around us who cry out in Spirit? Who can we embrace in love? To whom can we show simple kindness? Most of us will perform no heroic deeds of service, but each of us chooses to live either in love, with the Spirit guiding us to see the hurt of the world, or to live in numbness, denial, self-centeredness.

I leave you to think on one more poem by Mechthild of Magdeburg:
 True love in every moment praises God.
 Longing love brings a sorrow sweet to the pure.
 Seeking love belongs to itself alone.
 Understanding love gives itself equally to all.
 Enlightened love is mingled with the sadness of the world.
 But selfless love bears an effortless fruit,
 Working so quietly even the body cannot say how it comes and goes.