

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21
May 31, 2009 Pentecost Sunday

Hampton Baptist
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“We Can’t Control the Mystery”

Bailouts. Stock market declines. Terrorist attacks. Sex scandals. Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Threats in North Korea and Iran. *Rising* unemployment and *declining* 401ks. *These* headlines dominate our *news* cycles.

Expenses exceeding receipts. Lengthy Deacons Meetings to reduce the church’s budget. Investments not performing like they have in the past. Attendance in worship and Sunday School is stagnant or declining when plotted on a graph. Sanctuary air-conditioning system doesn’t work for three straight Sundays. The chiller that cools our educational space was installed in 1956, with the idea that it was to last for *thirty* years. Many who were considered to be iconic leaders for the past two or three decades are no longer living. *These* statements dominate our *church* conversations.

When I read or listen to the news, I become sad, because life is not as it used to be. There was a time when national anxiety was lowered, when national security was a given, when national reputation was not questioned. There was a time when the threat of unemployment or joblessness affected no one I knew, rather than many within my personal circle. There was a time when church-life produced fewer concerns and when hard decisions were rarely to be considered. There was a time when there were no worries about finances or facilities at church. These are not the times in which we now live.

The prophet Ezekiel also lived during a very trying time. Our text was recorded during the darkest time in all of Israel’s history. Life had changed for those now in exile. They had been called God’s chosen people; life had been good for them. David’s son, King Solomon built a tremendous Temple in Jerusalem; people called it God’s *house* and believed that was where God lived, a personal residence for the Deity. Israel then began to decline, eventually being divided into a southern kingdom known as Judah and the northern kingdom retained the name of Israel.

In 586 BC, the elite from Judah and Israel were led away from their homelands to be exiles in Babylon. Jerusalem was pillaged, and the Temple was destroyed. Many believed that God was dead, since God’s *house* was gone. The exiles were paralyzed with a feeling of hopelessness. Hope became a precious commodity, one which was in short supply.

Our Old Testament Lesson detailed a vision of Ezekiel; God’s hand was on him and he was brought up by the Spirit of the Lord finding himself surrounded by dry bones in a place which could be described as Death Valley. All around him, as far as the eye could see, were bleached, dry, brittle bones. The gruesome site reflected the hopeless state of Ezekiel’s people. God asked Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?”

Often when we experience hopelessness, we wallow rather than problem-solve. When we hit rock bottom or when there is no way out or when we feel trapped with no escape, we turn inward and surrender. Hopelessness indeed can be paralyzing, but God asked Ezekiel the intriguing question of whether *life* could infuse hopelessness.

If Ezekiel answered yes, he may have appeared presumptuous, unrealistic, or even Pollyanna. “Sure there is life after hopelessness, we just don’t know how to get there,” or “The sky might be falling, but I’m so optimistic that it can’t be that bad, or I’m so apathetic that I don’t care.” If Ezekiel answered no, he simply could be indicted of not believing in God’s power, so he offered a neutral response, “Only God knows.”

We do the same thing, don't we? When we are at our wits ends, we finally say, "Only God knows how this will turn out. I've tried everything possible to fix the problem. I've employed this strategy; I've solicited assistance from this expert; I've over-functioned and I've under-functioned and nothing I do seems to change the scenario. Only God knows *if* it will get better or *when* it will get better."

So God asked the prophet to do the unthinkable, "Ezekiel, *speak* to these dry bones. Tell them to get up. Try the impossible; command these dead bones to come together. Remind them that my breath, my Spirit will give them life. If you speak to them, if you have faith enough to believe in the impossible, if you grasp at the last straw of hope knowing that I *can* do something, then something *will* happen. These bones *will* come together; flesh *will* cover them and my breath, my Spirit *will* give them life."

Obviously, Ezekiel was a man of *great* faith who perhaps exercised that trust more readily than we do. Over and over in scripture, we are reminded of how important it is to *trust* God even in the most difficult of times. Time and time again, we are encouraged not to forget about the light, even though we know that it is always darkest just before dawn. Even a casual reading of the Bible reveals that our God implores us not to *abandon* hope because, as the scripture atop our worship page reads, "For mortals, it is impossible, but for God, all things are possible." Yet when we are given a chance to believe, to act, or to trust in the unthinkable, the unimaginable or the impossible, we fix our vision between the blinders of doubt and concrete reality.

God told Ezekiel to tell dead, dry bones to come together, and he did. The prophet *obeyed* God's directive, *trusted* God's instruction as odd and unreliable as it sounded, and then there was a noise. Perhaps over his left shoulder he heard the clinking of two bones touching, and then to his right the pinging of two more, and before he knew it, he found himself in surround-sound of a bone orchestra with bones becoming connected as skeletons.

That sound diminished, and then before his eyes, the skeletons became covered with human skin. Death valley was now full of more cadavers than a medical school laboratory. But there was no *life* in these bodies. The miraculous was taking place, because Ezekiel believed.

God then told Ezekiel to command breath to enter these bodies, to command the wind from the four corners of the earth to satiate these fleshy, lifeless bodies. Given the outcome of the previous command, Ezekiel *gladly* followed God's directive, and the bodies came to life.

Key to understanding this text is the Hebrew word meaning "breath" or "spirit." It appears ten times in these fourteen verses. In the English translation, we miss the deliberate plays on the word. God's spirit, God's breath gave life to dead bodies.

In order that there not be any misunderstanding about the meaning of the vision, God even interpreted it for Ezekiel. The dead bones represented the nation of Israel, who found themselves hopeless in exile. For them, Babylon may as well have been Death Valley, and their lack of hope certainly could be likened to dry, brittle bones. As quoted in verse 11, they were dried up, without hope, and they felt completely cut off from the presence of God. God reminded Ezekiel through this vision that God's breath, God's Spirit will bring life to any hopeless and despairing people, *if* the people trust.

I find wind to be mysterious. No one knows from where the wind comes, or when it will come up, or in what direction it will blow. Meteorologists attempt to warn us when significant potential damage is imminent, but they certainly are not without fault. Many of you remember when our steeple was blown onto this roof in 1999. A microburst, a mini-tornado, settled on Kings Way offering little

damage elsewhere in Hampton. No one predicted that the wind would do that kind of damage; it truly was mysterious.

The wind cannot be controlled, and that's exactly what scares us. The wind can only be experienced. On the Christian calendar, today is Pentecost Sunday, when the Spirit, wind, breath came upon those gathered as read from Acts 2. Jesus had ascended into heaven; many of those gathered in Acts 2 had visually viewed his departure. But now he was gone. They were promised that power would come upon them to be witnesses, but when? They remained together, in one place.

At Pentecost, we are called to experience the *power* of God's love and the *assurance* of God's grace . . . not just with our heads, but with our hearts. When the Spirit blew through the house where the gathered crowd resembled an assembly of the United Nations, the outcome was mysterious. Something had happened. As a result, people began to understand each other, even though they spoke different languages. In an attempt to explain the unexplainable, a rationale of *drunkenness* was offered by some bystanders. What had transpired was mysterious and uncontrollable by human forces. The unthinkable had happened.

I was fortunate during my doctoral work to have Dr. Mahan Siler as my graduate advisor; Mahan was a retired pastor from Raleigh. I met with him regularly regarding my writing and also discussed church-life at length. As I addressed him regarding worship planning and providing an experience which would be uplifting, I told him of the intricate planning processes, phone calls, etc., to make sure that everything happened as I wanted. He smiled and made a statement that has stuck with me, "But you can't control the mystery." The Spirit of God is mysterious and uncontrollable. This Spirit gave life to dead bones and gave life to a group which later were called the "church." The mystery of the Spirit creates opportunities for us when we find ourselves willing to listen and trust.

Our world is in trouble. The answer will not be found in more governmental spending or greater military might. Some would say that the global situations produce hopelessness, that the problems are simply too complex to be addressed.

Others look at our scenario here at 40 Kings Way, and may find themselves on an island of hopelessness. Some find themselves in a valley of dry bones symbolizing what was once a vibrant community with few ills or concerns. Some become paralyzed with fear at the bleached bones and the focus becomes fixated on *when* these bones were living, and *how* this valley became so lifeless. To those who might identify with that statement, I encourage you to listen to the wind, the breath, the Spirit of God posing the question, "Can these bones live?" And like Ezekiel, our response may also be, "Only God knows."

But if we continue the conversation, if we are open to the Spirit which is blowing with the fervency of Pentecostal fire, if we try not to control the mystery, then we may hear the voice of God saying, "Speak to the deadness of the situation. Address the lifelessness with hopefulness. Believe in the unbelievable. Request that the Spirit of God turn heartache into wholeness, anxiety into calm, dysfunction into health, distress into peace, darkness to light, Good Friday into Easter, hopelessness into a future.

Human power could not create lasting change or certainly could not infuse life into dead bones, but this truly has been accomplished by God's Spirit. We cannot solve our church's dilemmas with acceptable human relations tools or simply with better accounting procedures or greater requests for tithes and lowered spending. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and everything else will take care of itself." God's Kingdom has to be first.

Dead bones only live because of God's Spirit. The Church of Jesus Christ was created by God's Spirit. We will never be more powerful than God's Spirit; we can't control the mystery.

Let's be thankful that there is no situation which is ever considered to be fully hopeless, because God can even make dry dead bones live. Let us be grateful that the Spirit of God burst wildly onto the scene at Pentecost and has been breathing life and fire into communities of faith ever since. And finally, let us always remember that we cannot control the mystery of God's Spirit, that it moves where and when it chooses, and that we are simply called to believe and to trust, and then everything else will take care of itself.