

ENVISION! IMAGINE! DREAM!

Ezekiel 37:1-10, Acts 2:1-12b

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Blacksburg Presbyterian Church

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Sometimes we need to dream! Sometimes we need to let our imaginations run free! Sometimes we need to believe that things can be better. In 587 BC, about six centuries before the time of Jesus, things could not have been much worse for the Jewish people. Jerusalem had been attacked and destroyed. Many of the Hebrew people had been scattered into exile, robbed of their homeland, plunged into poverty. Hope for even the semblance of a favorable future was in short supply.

Then Ezekiel, prophet and priest for the exiles in Babylon, has a vision, a dream. He says, "The hand of the Lord came upon me..." Can you imagine? It is an awesome thing for the hand of the Lord to come upon you! "The hand of the Lord came upon me", he declares. "I felt the Lord's power take control of me, and his Spirit - the Holy Spirit - carried me to a valley full of bones." Human bones, dry bones, desiccated bones! Bones everywhere, littering the landscape, broiling under the Middle Eastern sun! He goes on. "The Lord took me on a hike through the bones. I was up to my knees in bones! They were dead!...But then the Lord asked me, 'Ezekiel, can these bones come back to life? Can they live again?' Well, I thought, what a silly question! Of course not. But I'm no dummy. I'm not stupid. So since it was the Lord who was asking, I replied, 'Only you, Lord, know the answer to that question!'

"Then, can you believe it, the Lord told me to preach to the bones. So I started to speak, and lo and behold, God's Spirit began to breathe into the bones, and sinews and muscles and flesh were connecting. Before I know it I've got a living, breathing congregation in front of me! They get up on their feet and begin to move! A whole community in motion!"

I've had the honor and joy to preach for some fifty five years now, and I know there have been people who have fallen asleep during my sermons. Without doubt lots of folks could also have mumbled, "I was dying to get home for lunch!" But as far as I know no one has ever actually died during my preaching! I am very glad that you here this morning are not merely bones!

It's an odd story, for sure. A vision! A dream! Imagination! The bones are a metaphor for the scattered Jewish exiles who have no more hope of resuscitating the kingdom of Israel than of putting flesh on a skeleton and calling it life. Ezekiel's dream of life triumphing over death, of hope springing out of hopelessness, all starts when the hand of the Lord comes upon Ezekiel, and he does not turn away. Allowing God's Holy Spirit to move him into a place of death, to confront head on the utter hopelessness of the way things were, to imagine the totally improbable possibility of a better future, Ezekiel's hope is reborn. It is God's gift. Grace! He has a gospel to proclaim! Right there among the exiles, in Babylon where things are really bad!

Babylon got its name from that ancient account out of the prehistory of the Hebrew people explaining why there is conflict and violence and warfare in human affairs, why tragically, hopelessness all too often plagues us. It's the story of the tower of Babel, about people trying to take the place of God by building a tower into the heavens only to be struck down by God and scattered across the earth into countries and tribes and clans and families each with their own language and self-serving concerns often in conflict with one another. And because we get

jaded, jaundiced, wearied, cynical, even we who have been given the gospel, it becomes hard to imagine a world of harmony and justice and peace, to dream of new possibilities.

We like to play it safe. So here we are here, people of faith, safely together here in church, in this room called the sanctuary. Did you know that in our country 20% of all fatal accidents happen in cars and trucks, 17% in homes, 14% to pedestrians, a combined 16% in planes, trains, and boats, with assorted other tragedies including fires making up the rest? Only one in every 100,000 fatal accidents occurs in a church. My friends, if you want to play it safe, spend as much time as you possibly can in church!

We are usually most comfortable going along with the way things are. That seems safest. But sometimes we need to dream. Sometimes we need to let our imaginations run free. Sometimes we need to allow ourselves to believe that things can be better. The author Annie Dillard wrote a highly acclaimed piece of literature called, Teaching a Stone to Talk. She asks, "Why do we people in churches seem like brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?...Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke?...We should all be wearing crash helmets to church. The ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares. They should lash us to our pews. For God may someday take offense at us,...or draw us out to where we can never return." Again and again the testimony of scripture calls us away from the security of the familiar to new people and places, problems and possibilities.

Today is one of our big three annual festival days. We Christians have Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost to celebrate. The birth of Jesus, his resurrection, and today, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, turning them into apostles, birthing the Church. The commercial world has corrupted Christmas and Easter, but not Pentecost...not yet, hopefully not ever. Pentecost, so named because it came fifty days after Passover, bringing each year multitudes of pilgrims from the Jewish diaspora back to Jerusalem. This Pentecost was different. Jesus, called the Christ, the anointed One, had been crucified during the Passover period. But he had risen from the dead, had met with his disciples on a number of occasions, specifically telling them that God was going to baptize them with the Holy Spirit, empowering them to travel out over the world to proclaim God's astonishingly good news of victory over death.

They had waited through the fifty days and nights, frequently gathering for mutual support, most likely in the Upper Room, chilling in today's vernacular, hanging out. Then, suddenly, the hand of the Lord is upon them, the power of God takes control of them, the Holy Spirit breathes new life into them. And Babel is reversed! Like Ezekiel moved by the Holy Spirit to preach to dry bones, the Holy Spirit moves the disciples to speak. So they begin to tell about God's great deeds, about God's grace, certainly about the resurrection of Jesus. Now it's a big throng assembled there on Pentecost from more than a dozen nations, pilgrims who have come with the languages spoken in those nations. Astonishingly, the disciples find themselves speaking in the languages of those other nations, in languages with which they themselves are unfamiliar. Imagine someone here this morning is from Russia, and all of a sudden I begin to preach in Russian, though nyet, I've never learned Russian! And there is a family here this morning from Pakistan, and our liturgist today starts telling the gospel story in Urdu, a language our liturgist has never known. And a couple has come this morning from China, and one of you elders finds yourself telling them about Jesus with a Mandarin tongue you never went to school to learn. And what we are doing is communicating. Creating community! Building relationships across barriers of language and politics and customs.

The disciples did not have crash helmets, life preservers, or signal flares. They could have, for they deployed across the world to tell the story of God's grace in Jesus, the Christ, in most of their cases laying down their lives as martyrs in the process. They spelled faith "RISK", but that was fine, because they allowed the Holy Spirit to empower them. The hand of the Lord was upon them.

I went to college to become an engineer. Big mistake! My dad was an engineer, my son is an engineer. I am not an engineer. No one ever asks me for tech support! Freshman physics and calculus ignited my love affair with the liberal arts, and especially history, a love that continues to grow to this day. Because history has so much to teach us! I found myself curious about how the Holy Spirit might have been at work right here in our midst in times past. So I consulted the book Charles Taylor has written, What Mean These Stones?, detailing the history of our Blacksburg Presbyterian Church. I commend it to you. Back to that in a moment.

I would like you to do something. Note on your calendars Sunday and Monday, October 21 and 22, the dates for our next Smyth lecture series. We will have the enormous privilege of welcoming from Edinburgh, Scotland, John Philip Newell, one of the leading interpreters of the Celtic Christian spiritual tradition. Dr. Newell will preach on Sunday morning, and make presentations Sunday and Monday evenings. Over the years world class figures like Dr. Newell have come to us periodically through this congregation's Smyth Endowment program. The endowment honors the memory of Dr. Ellison Smyth who served as pastor here from 1948 through 1968. Based on Charles Taylor's book and conversations with folks old enough to remember that era, it is clear to me that the reconciling, community building work of the Holy Spirit was very active during Dr. Smyth's pastorate because of his willingness, that of his wife Mary Linda, and other leaders of this church to dream, to envision, to imagine that racial barriers could be overcome. Behold - history's lesson!

Those were years of racial turmoil here in Blacksburg, throughout Virginia and beyond. In 1954 the Supreme Court handed down the Brown v. Board of Education decision declaring that public schools must be integrated. Massive resistance followed. A number of counties closed their schools rather than complying. Racial tension was palpable. Dr. and Mrs. Smyth, gently but firmly moved this church to a public declaration, grounded in the gospel, that discrimination would not be tolerated, that all persons of whatever race or background were welcome here. They supported Presbyterian campus minister Woody Leach who led a group of Tech students to the heart of the resistance in Prince Edward County for a summer literacy project for 520 African American children. Dr. Smyth must have felt like he was preaching to dry bones at first, a hopeless task, a fool's errand. But the hand of the Lord was upon him. He was willing to wade in among the bones! Clearly guided by the Holy Spirit, in the face of daunting opposition even from the president of Virginia Tech who was then a member of the Session, this congregation opened its doors to all.

There are lots of reasons for feeling a sense of hopelessness these days as we view what's happening in our society, our culture, our politics. We need, I believe, to keep envisioning, keep dreaming, keep imagining, that with the hand of the Lord upon us, we can get in there among the bones! Empowered by the Holy Spirit at work through us we just might find the bones coming alive again, our hopes for a better world reborn!