

“The Breath of Faith”

Last Sunday’s message, in a nut shell, proclaimed the Church as the embodiment of Easter. The ministry of our Lord upon his return to the Father needed a vehicle to propel Jesus’ message and work into the future. That vehicle, for better or for worse, is the Church. And despite what people say or think about the Christian Church, the fact is the Church is God’s creation. Though at times corrupt ... inept ... sinful ... hypocritical (indeed humanly flawed!) ... the Church is the means of grace for you and me ... and the whole world. God chooses to work through the Church. God engenders the Church with His Spirit ... a Spirit that empowers the Church to do God’s will. So it really doesn’t matter what you or I think about the Church as an institution ... for God is not interested in our opinions. What concerns God is the faithfulness of the people that God has called into the Church ... which in fact is today’s *living* Body of Christ.

God desires our faithfulness, and the Church, as we know it, is as faithful as its people are faithful. The Church is as effective as its people are disciplined. The Church is as alive as its people are alive! When the Israelites chose not to be faithful ... when Israelites worshipped themselves rather than God, they became vulnerable to outside worldly forces and were conquered ... led away into exile ... not abandoned by God, but separated from God by their very acts of faithlessness.

Bones often represent the essence of humanity ... life. The Israelites lamented: “Our bones are dried up.” The Psalmist cries: “My bones waste away.” Proverbs says a downcast spirit is like dry bones. Dry bones are utter death. Israel in Babylonian captivity is dead ... utterly dead. The only remaining thought is ... can these bones live? Can Israel be restored to God? Can a new community be resurrected out of such ultimate death? What will reconstitute Israel as a nation? The only power able to breathe life into the dead nation of Israel is God’s Holy Spirit. We think that God’s Spirit is dispensed only individually? No! In fact, the Spirit of God in the Bible is more often related to the power that forms community ... a force that brings life to a group of people who have no sense of community. A lack of community spirit could be referred to as “dry bones.” The deadness of a community is attributed to the absence of spirit.

The question before Ezekiel, as he is confronted by the drought and valley of dry bones, is the same question facing Christ’s Church today. In the Church, in many of its forms, there is death, decay, and decline. Although the decay is real, the Spirit of God is yet able to breathe upon the Church to bring life out of death. Can these bones live? That is the question ... the pivotal point in today’s lesson. Only God knows. If there is to be life for such utterly dead bones, then it will not be through human effort or some act of self-improvement. It will be because of an act of God, some stunning act of creation, not unlike that of the wind in Genesis, chapter 1 ... not unlike that of the vivification of those bones at the tomb on Easter after Friday at the Place of the Skull. The bottom line is that God’s breath will have the last word in matters of life and of death.

There is another critical question that must be asked before wondering if dry bones can come to life. When H. L. Mencken was informed that past president Calvin Coolidge was dead, he responded, “How can they tell?” Could this be said of the Church today? Is Christ’s Church dead or dying? While our nation wallows in ethical and moral decay, while several institutions are on life support systems, the Christian Church in large measures does its “own thing” somewhat oblivious to the world in which it operates.

Our own denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), has declined in membership by 40% in the last thirty years. Our bones may not be completely dry, but the skin sure is falling off. There are several reasons that can be attributed to the decline, but to ponder those reasons means nothing. As a denomination, we may already be dead and don’t know it! How can anyone tell? The Presbyterian Church began to decline when it moved away from the simple structure of Board of Missions and Board of Christian Education to an assortment of program agencies. Institutional decay always begins from within. Prominence, power, and influence are lacking ... compared to two hundred years ago.

On June 11, 1775 the Reverend George Duffield of Third Presbyterian, Philadelphia, delivered a sermon on Isaiah 35. In the congregation was John Adams, who was attending meetings of Congress. That afternoon, he wrote a letter to his wife, Abigail, expressing how he had been moved by the sermon: "I have been this morning to hear Mr. Duffield, a preacher in this city whose principles, prayer, and sermons more nearly resemble those of our New England clergy than any I have heard. His discourse was a kind of exposition on the thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah. America was the wilderness, and the solitary place, and he said it would be glad, 'rejoice and blossom as the rose.' He labored 'to strengthen the weak hands and confirm the feeble knees.' He 'said to them that were of fearful heart, be strong, fear not. Behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with recompense; he will come and save you.' ... 'No lion shall be there, nor any ravenous beast shall go up thereon, but the redeemed shall walk there.' He applied the whole prophecy to this country, and gave us as animating an entertainment as I ever heard. He filled and swelled the bosom of every hearer. I hope you have received a letter, in which I enclosed you a pastoral letter from the synod of New York and Philadelphia; by this you will see, that the clergy this way are but now beginning to engage in politics, and they engage with a fervor that will produce wonderful effects."

I often hear that this nation was founded on Christian principles, which may or may not be true. But one thing is true; the leaders who lead this nation to freedom from oppression and carved out a nation founded on democratic principles were leaders, who for the most part, were inspired by the preaching of God's Word. The proclamation of Good News called forth the will of God from those who would birth this country. The church played its part and was clear about its role. True religion and politics should never mix, but they can compliment each other and provide a unique balance. But somehow, Christ's Church has forgotten its role in the world. It has become too much *like* the world and *like* the culture, rather than being like Jesus Christ.

People of faith are to be in the world but not of the world. We are living on God's creation, but God is to be more of an influence on our individual lives and on the life of Christ's Church than the world. The Church may exist in our society but is it alive? Is it effective? Is it using its God given power to direct people to God, or is the church using its power to puff itself up? How can we tell? I think we can tell by looking at any church and seeing if the neighborhood in which it exists is influenced by its presence. Does that church play an important role in shaping that community ... its values ... its morals ... its standards? Does that church obey Jesus' commandments to love its neighbors by being willing and able to serve all?

Does that church pray ... lifting up one another to God? Does that church grow according to God's will, and make such changes as guided by that will? Is that church full of Easter people that are open to the Spirit ... guided by the Spirit ... inspired by the Spirit? Does that church from time to time, step into the shoes of Ezekiel and examine itself ... ponder the question: "Can their bones?" Can they truly live? And is that church wise enough not to answer the question ... but to simply acknowledge ... "O Lord God, thou knowest!?" All we can ever know is that God knows! Trust in God is a large part of what it means to be a Christian and Christ's Church.

I have tried over the course of my ministry to practice what I've just preached. I have a sense of some success and a sense of some failure. I also have a growing sense that God has plans for this church beyond anyone's imagination. God has richly blessed us and over time, these blessings will bear much fruit. I am also very clear, knowing the history of this church, that its longevity has not solely rested on the ability of its pastors but in a larger measure has rested on the effective leadership of its people. You in the pew are the bones that God makes come alive. His spirit breathes fresh into your soul.

Pentecost is a reality. Without Easter we have no bases for faith. Without Pentecost, our faith has no power. Therefore, let us pray fervently that God's spirit visit us ... that each of us will have the faith and courage towards a greater commitment ... that together we will grow to be a closer faith community ... fellowship of faith ... more effective in our witness. Let us pray that God reveals to us His will for our mission ... that we will be God's agents in this world speaking and living the Good News of the Gospel. My dear friend ... seriously ... pray for the Holy Spirit! For without the Spirit, we are as good as dead! Amen!