

## **“Happy Rebirthday!”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

May 23, 2021 – Pentecost Sunday

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

Happy birthday, church! Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church, and many congregations celebrate Pentecost Sunday each year by sharing birthday cake (I hope we can do this next year; do you think we can fit 1992 candles on it?). People say this is the church’s birthday because it was on this day, almost 2000 years ago, that the gathered disciples of Christ received and were baptized in God’s Spirit, and just as baptism with water marks the beginning of one’s journey as a member in our fellowship, baptism in the Spirit marked a new beginning in the journey of the disciples.

But the story of Acts 2 that we read this morning tells of the birth not only of a new beginning for the disciples, but of a new era in human history, in which the separation between God and people and between people and one another is bridged by God and people are reconciled to their Creator and each other.

We read of God’s Spirit coming upon the disciples of Jesus as they were gathered together some 50 days after the events of the Holy Week. They were in Jerusalem with many fellow Jews, who, like them, came from places outside of Jerusalem. Some of the disciples were from Galilee, which is about 60 miles north of Jerusalem as the bird flies. These Galilean Jews were identified as such by their own unique customs and ways of speaking. Many other Jews, who either lived in Jerusalem or had gathered there for the Pentecost Festival, came from even more distant places, as from the time of the Diaspora, that is the dispersal of Jews from Palestine during and after the invasions of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, more Jewish people lived outside of

Palestine than lived in it. Many of these people who lived outside of Judea traveled from wherever they were to Jerusalem for important festivals and holidays, such as Pentecost. When they came, they, like the Galilean disciples, brought with them their own unique customs and languages.

When the Spirit of God came upon the disciples that Pentecost, they all began to babble, proclaiming the message of God's love and deeds of power in the many languages of the multitudes who had gathered in Jerusalem. Their babbling amazed the masses, who heard not a strange cacophony of unintelligible chatter, but the message of God proclaimed in their own tongues. And as they babbled, the curse of Babel was erased: Though from the time of the Tower of Babel, people were scattered across the face of the earth and spoke a multitude of languages, they were at Pentecost united in hearing the same message of God's love. The curse of Eden was also erased: Though from the time of expulsion from the garden, people had been separated from the paradise enjoyed in the presence of God, they were at Pentecost united with God through the outpouring of God's Spirit upon them.

This reverse of the curse brought a new beginning to the disciples on that Pentecost, as well as to all who were then gathered in Jerusalem, and, indeed, the whole world ever since. For God's Wind did not come to them alone, but has come to all of us. It surrounds us and, as a breath, is within us, giving us God's life and God's words. Because of God's indwelling Spirit, we are enabled to proclaim God's message of truth and life to one another and the world in ways that bring unity and wholeness, so blessing all of humankind with God's love. Praise be to God!

In our first reading from Ezekiel, we behold with the prophet a vision of valley full of dry bones. What Ezekiel saw on the valley floor was a

lifeless mass, the fleshless, skeletal remains of a whole nation. These very dry bones symbolized the people of the House of Israel, who had then been conquered by the Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and took into captivity many of the Judean people, including the prophet Ezekiel and all of their other religious and political leaders, leaving nothing but destruction and disorder in their terrible wake. Israel was completely ruined and without hope; they were nothing but a valley of dry bones.

But God had big plans for those bones. The prophet spoke God's word to them and they returned to form, with "The toe bone connected to the foot bone / the foot bone connected to the heel bone / the heel bone connected to the ankle bone / the ankle bone connected to the shin bone" (you know how the rest of it goes!). The scattered bones came together and formed people again, who had their own flesh restored and their own breath renewed. And they were promised to receive within them God's own Breath--God's Spirit--and to have life *beyond* what they had ever enjoyed before.

This is what God does with people. The One who spoke the universe into existence and formed living beings from the primordial soup with just a word, can take the dry, dusty, dead things of this world and breathe new, abundant life into them. The God who created is still and always at the work of re-creation!

What good news this is for us on this birthday of the church. God birthed us to be a people who proclaim God's uniting message of love and to carry within ourselves a living story of regeneration. Friend, you are not just an old bag of bones, but the house of the living, healing, restoring, renewing God. With God's indwelling Spirit, you are never broken beyond repair or ruined beyond hope. Whoever you are, wherever you've been on your life journey, or wherever you are now,

God comes to you just as you are and is doing something new and amazing within you! So pay attention to God at work in your life on this birthday of the church, that it might also be for you a *rebirthday*.

And let us boldly proclaim our good news that God is at work in the world--still speaking, still creating, still rebirthing. For the world is not without hope. The dry bones of the warring nations are not so lifeless and broken that they are beyond God's amazing ability to restore them to life and wholeness. And the broken parts of our own society are not so far busted that God cannot repair them and breathe new life into them. So let us experience in our own lives the restoring love of God, and let us continue to proclaim with fiery power the message that through love, God can heal our nation and all the people of the world. Amen.