

Pentecost Sunday, Year B. May 23, 2021. Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21.

God is up to something new, something we have never seen before—and it is the same thing that God is always doing. At Pentecost, God’s new work bursts into the rooms where we have locked ourselves away, and sweeps us out into a new world, or perhaps, a changing world where God is at work in a new way. It is disconcerting to love a God who surprises us. We would rather have a cuddly deity in house shoes who might drop favors from the sky but will mostly leave us to get on with messing things up on our own. It is a rather different feeling to believe that God continues to make the world in love, and—even worse—invites us to be junior partners in that making. That kind of God changes things, changes us, gets up to something new and invites or drags us along.

But though God might surprise us, though God does get up to new things, God is not random. Like a jazz musician whose performance may be a little different every night, our God has some reliable themes—and the most reliable of them is that God is the one who brings new life out of all manner of death. It is God’s business to turn graves into gardens, to go with us through death and there to make new life. We get this in our reading this morning from Ezekiel. The prophet is taken out into a valley that is for some reason full of dry bones. And there he sees the dry bones wrapped in flesh again and inspirited with breath. More than that, he is directed to play a role in this phantasmagoria, prophesying to the bones and the wind, playing a small part in God’s work of bringing life where we can see only death.

Ezekiel is with his people in exile, surely at times joining with them in saying “our bones are dried up, our hope is lost.” In its first context, this strange sign names the enervating, desiccating effect of exile and then delivers God’s promise to redeem the people from their exile, put them back on good soil, and abide within them as the spirit of life. It makes no bones about how bad things are—and even there, in an almost mythically lifeless place, God’s life-giving Spirit is at work. When hope is lost, God is doing something new.

The day of Pentecost is ten days after Jesus’ Ascension, his departure from earth and return to his Father. The disciples have seen him risen, they have spent forty days with him after the resurrection, but he has been gone for over a week now. And even though he left them with instructions to await the Holy Spirit, I’m guessing that around the seventh day of their vigil some of them were starting to wonder just what was going to happen to this movement that has taken them away from their livelihoods in Galilee and, through profound joy and heartache, led them to believe that God was finally delivering their people. Our reading today doesn’t record their last conversation with Jesus. He gathers them together in the suburbs and they ask “Lord, is this the time that you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” Even then, after all of Jesus’ earthly ministry, they are looking for him to become a king like other kings.

They have expectations, and perhaps shortly before the day of Pentecost, some of those expectations are beginning to crack. And *then* God does the new thing of Pentecost, filling them with the Holy Spirit and empowering them not to do what they wanted, but to join the work of bringing good news to the whole world. That movement in which they placed all their hopes is in a bewildering instant brought to new life, transformed. And they are swept up into that transformed work and sent to do things that had been impossible.

Perhaps, like me, there have been times in the last year when you joined the exiled faithful in saying “my bones are dried up, my hope is lost.” Perhaps some of us have had expectations or hopes that have crumbled in our hands. As a church, certainly, we have been changed by this last year. We have lost much. And God is preparing a new thing to do among us.

I don't know what that new thing will be, but I trust that it will involve God making life where we expect to find only death, and that we will not be a passive audience to it. Like Ezekiel and like the disciples, we will find that God's new work offers invitations to and makes demands on us. God's transformation of the world transforms us, as well, and calls us, too, back to life.