

“God’s Spirit in the Bones and the Wind”

Acts 10:44-48; I John 5:1-6, John 15:9-17

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr.
Senior Minister

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From the Pulpit

The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215

Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741

Email: home@first-church.org

Website: <http://www.first-church.org>

A Pentecost Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Pentecost Sunday, May 23, 2021, dedicated to the Israelis and Palestinians who have taken and lost lives in the most recent battle, to our newest members, LJ Cooks, Mary Jo Hudson, Beth Moseley, John and Chris Moseley, John Parsons and Karen Sandell, and Janice Taft, to our graduates from the class of 2021 in high school, college and graduate school, to all the staff, members and friends of First Church who have endured the loss of family and friends during this pandemic and survived themselves in the midst of such loss and always to the glory of God!

“God’s Spirit in the Bones and the Wind”

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27,16:4b-15

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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In 597 B.C., King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem and took many of its leaders into captivity, including the prophet, Ezekiel. The captives were not imprisoned in Babylon. They were free to marry, free to build homes, free to plant crops and free to worship their God. Many thrived in this

environment. But there was always a deep yearning to go home again – to return to the life and the land they had known before. There was always a heaviness of heart that could not be glossed over. There was always a pain that could not be filled. There was always a sadness that moved through their bodies and could be felt in their bones.

We can really identify with Ezekiel and his compatriots. Although we are beginning to return to our **New, New Normal**, there is a lament, a weeping, a yearning deep in our bones. We long to fully return. We long to hold on to each other. We are trying to remember what this place we have been taken from feels like, looks like, smells like, tastes like. We are trying to remember what each of our loved ones here looks like and feels like. The separation is still very real. The loneliness for many of us is still palpable. The longing is real. It literally hurts some days.

However, we are blessed, as people of God, to know the story doesn't end here. Although exile and separation feel ever so close, we know that God's story and God's creative energy **NEVER** ends in emptiness and despair. It simply has its beginnings there. God's story is a never-ending tale of resurrected hope. God rises when others collapse and give up.

Here in Ezekiel 37, God takes his prophet Ezekiel by the hand and leads him into Death Valley — the valley of dry bones. As far as the eye can see – dry bones are strewn everywhere. There in the Valley of Dry Bones God asks the prophet a question (I share a translation directly from the Hebrew): *“Son of Humankind, will these bones ever live again?”* Ezekiel replies, *“You my Lord God, who reveal Your loving kindness in justice, only You know the answer!”*

God commands Ezekiel to prophesy these words to those bones: *“Dry Bones, hear the Word of God! Thus, says the Lord, God, who reveals His loving kindness in justice, spoken to these bones: Behold I will bring Spirit into you and you will live again!”* With these words of “loving kindness in justice, spoken to the bones” the bones begin to take shape again. Bone to bone, sinew to sinew, skin on skin, and finally breath and spirit and they stand upon their feet as a very, very great host!

These bones not only rise and take on life again, they return in the fullness of life and return home. I ask, “who among us is greater than God?” Who will go to God and say, we are separated; we are dispersed; we dried up; we are done? Which one of you is going to defy our God who raises the dead and tell God – “You can’t do this, because I can’t do it?” Which one is faithless enough to try something that is defiant of God?

Only God can raise the Dead! In Ezekiel, God displays the power and presence of Resurrection Hope!

And this is only our first lesson! If this is too fanciful, too strange, perhaps just too metaphorical for our rational minds of faith, then join me in Jerusalem – 33 AD, where the Spirit of God moves from bones to wind!

On the day of Pentecost people were gathered from every nation under heaven – at least the nations under the heavens known to Luke! Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes (or students of Judaism) Cretans and Arabians.

It sounds like a sunlit version of New York's Times Square on New Year's Eve. Jerusalem is crowded and festive. With high spirits, bad manners, jostling and bargaining going on everywhere – both the bizarre and the bazaar of this metropolis serve as the backdrop for the unfolding drama of God's Holy Spirit acting in history! This time, God doesn't choose an empty valley of dry bones. God chooses the packed capitol city on a high holy day to flip the script of human history.

When the day dawns there are about 120 Jesus Movement people moping around wondering what they were going to do without their Savior. Suddenly, a Holy Hurricane heads their way! By biblical accounting this mighty wind, these tongues of heavenly fire, this Breath of God is called the Holy Spirit!

Before any of them can defend themselves against the power of God, they are all hit by God's Holy Spirit which bursts flames of faith over them and fills every one of their cells with the Breath of God! They speak in the tongues of all nations.

And this Times Square-like crowd (at midday not midnight) hears them speaking and understands these simple Galileans as if they all had PhD's in Middle Eastern languages. Shy people become bold people! Scared people become gutsy people. Lost people find an unconditional sense of direction. Disciples begin to discover abilities within themselves of which they had not believed themselves capable. They open their mouths to speak and sound like Jesus. They touch people who are sick and it is as if Jesus himself were doing the healing.

Just 53 nights before, Peter couldn't even defend Jesus against the words of a woman warming her hands in midnight fire light

on the night in which his master and teacher was tortured unto death. Now Peter stands in the streets and preaches to thousands of people! He has to convince them (while convicting them) that he isn't drunk at midday.

He is so bold that he delivers a six-point sermon on Pentecost (he must be drunk!). First, the Kingdom of God is at hand; second, the coming of God's kingdom is directly related to the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus; third, Jesus now sits at the right hand of God as the Messianic head of the new Israel; fourth, the Holy Spirit coming upon them is the sign of Christ's presence and glory; fifth, the messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the second coming of Christ; and finally, all who hear must repent, ask for God's forgiveness, and salvation will come with the power of the Holy Spirit!

When Pentecost ends, the Jesus Movement has grown from 120 to more than 3,000 - which is now referred to as "*Kuriakos*" or "**those of the Lord.**" There is absolutely no explanation for what happens that day, except these newcomers and disciples were overwhelmed by the Breath of God.

They sucked in God's own breath and they were absolutely transformed by it. They heard and felt Good News and were absolutely transformed by it! Folks who had been inhaling fear and uncertainty breathed in new life and began to exhale faith and boldness. People who were worn out from exhaustion and buried on the trail were renewed and revived so much so that each breath they took in and let out was the very breath of God.

And this is where Inspiration turns to Conspiracy.

Let me explain. To “Conspire” literally means to “breathe together.” Let’s all take a breath. (Everyone!) Now blow it out. Do it Again. And one last time just to show COVID19 how tough we are.

There you go! We have just launched a conspiracy!

Can you hear the word “Spirit” in there? To “Conspire” means to be filled with the same spirit, to be enlivened by the same wind. What happens when we come together to worship is that the Holy Spirit swoops in among us, knits us together through songs and anthems, this Children’s Time and Adult Time, through prayers and litanies, through baptism and holy communion. Our many breaths become one breath. Our many and varied voices become – for a point in time – one voice. And the Breath of God becomes the Conspiratorial Fire for Community in Christ.

Thousands of years ago, God asked Ezekiel, “*Can these dry bones live?*” Ezekiel answered, “*Only you, O God, know.*” And the way God shared knowledge was to send the Holy Spirit, the “*Ruach*” the Breath of Life, upon those bones! And they came together! In the same way, the Hurricane of the Holy Spirit swept through despairing and dried up people on the first Pentecost and set them on fire for the Lord!

All of this is really nice. It’s great literature. We have powerful images here. But what about us? What about God coming to you wherever you are – RIGHT NOW? What about fire and power and Spirit and the very breath of God for this day, for this time, for your life, for this community?

I believe the Spirit is conspiring as we speak. Vaccinated, we are finding our way back to health. I've quoted him a million times already when Dr. Andy Thomas of OSU Wexner Medical Center says, *"the vaccine is like a brick wall. COVID19 hits that wall and falls powerless to the ground."* The image of COVID19 dead on the ground – with no chance of rising – is beautiful to me.

I saw two statistics this week that I shared with some of you. Since January 2021, over 99% of all hospital admissions with COVID19 have been unvaccinated people. Over 99.8% of all COVID19 related deaths since January have been unvaccinated people. If you want to spread love and not COVID19 – get the vaccine. Let's get together again and spread love – not covid.

Beyond the pandemic, I see the conspiring of the Holy Spirit in our faith community. I am aware that I feel something very special is happening at First Church! Let's call it a Conspiracy – a conspiracy of reconciliation, a conspiracy of faith, a conspiracy of grace, a conspiracy of hope, a conspiracy of love, a conspiracy for God, a conspiracy for Jesus Christ!

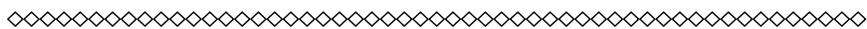
This Pentecost Sunday, we are growing while we are apart. We added 16 new members in the past eight days. Thanks be to God!

Say their names: Elijah, Samuel, Lila, Ruby, Abigail, Maya, Jacob, Elias, LJ, Mary Jo, Beth, John, Chris, John, Karen, and Janice. All 16 of you are so amazing to me! Thanks be to God for you! Some of you have never entered our house of worship. Some of you have been here only once. Nevertheless, you have joined us for our journey together. That is a Conspiracy of FAITH if I ever heard of one before! Amen!

Soon, you will enter these doors again. You will return stronger having been changed by the journey of the past 14 months. You will return more convicted and conspired by the Holy Spirit's movement in our lives.

Call it what you will, but each of us is being called by God to be here for some deep and abiding reason. There is no mistake. God has a plan for us here! And it is a plan that will include all of us! It is a plan that is and will continue to be inspired by the Holy Spirit!

God's Spirit is in the Bones and in the Wind today. I pray that your bones and your breath may inherit the wind of conspiracy as we breathe together and walk together in all God's ways! Come Holy Spirit! Come Now! Amen.



My Benediction for the Congregation today and for this summer, based on Deuteronomy 32:43:

May God bless you and keep you as you take to heart all these words that God has granted us through the years. May God's Word guide and protect you now as you come together again. This is no small matter for you. It is life and faith and hope about which we are speaking. While we are apart, one from another, I pray that you will live well, that you will feel God's blessing in your life and that goodness and love will lead you. May God hold us together in spirit and in truth while we are apart one from another. May the blessing of our Creator, Redeemer, and Holy Spirit, keep us strong. Amen.

