

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

## **Day of Pentecost**

**Whitsunday**

**Year B**

**RCL**



Ezekiel 37:1-14

Psalms 104: 24-34, 35b

Acts 2:1-21

### **The Collect**

O God, who on this day taught the hearts of your faithful people by sending to them the light of your Holy Spirit: Grant us by the same Spirit to have a right judgment in all things, and evermore to rejoice in his holy comfort; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophecy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O

breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

Psalm 104: 24-34,35b

- 24 O LORD, how manifold are your works!  
In wisdom you have made them all;  
the earth is full of your creatures.
- 25 Yonder is the sea, great and wide,  
creeping things innumerable are there,  
living things both small and great.
- 26 There go the ships,  
and Leviathan that you formed to sport in it.
- 27 These all look to you  
to give them their food in due season;
- 28 when you give to them, they gather it up;  
when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.
- 29 When you hide your face, they are dismayed;  
when you take away their breath, they die  
and return to their dust.
- 30 When you send forth your spirit, they are created;  
and you renew the face of the ground.
- 31 May the glory of the LORD endure forever;  
may the LORD rejoice in his works —
- 32 who looks on the earth and it trembles,  
who touches the mountains and they smoke.
- 33 I will sing to the LORD as long as I live;  
I will sing praise to my God while I have being.
- 34 May my meditation be pleasing to him,  
for I rejoice in the LORD.
- 35b Bless the LORD, O my soul.  
Praise the LORD!

**Romans 8:22-27**

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

*or*

## Acts 2:1-21

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs – in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” All were amazed and

perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?” But others sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o’clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

‘In the last days it will be, God declares,  
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,  
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,  
and your young men shall see visions,  
and your old men shall dream dreams.

Even upon my slaves, both men and women,  
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;  
and they shall prophesy.

And I will show portents in the heaven above  
and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and  
smoky mist.

The sun shall be turned to darkness

and the moon to blood,  
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious  
day.

Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord  
shall be saved.””



**John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15**

Jesus said to his disciples, “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. But, now I am going to him who sent me; yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned.

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his

own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

## SERMON

It's Pentecost, or Whitsunday. When you think about Pentecost, what sort of images, apart from the picnic, go through your mind? Do you think of it as a historical event only or an event with contemporary impact? What would you think of a Pentecost event happening now, here? Would you welcome such a thing? Francis Chan asserted "For some reason, we don't think we need the Holy Spirit. We don't expect the Holy Spirit to act. Or if we do, our expectations are often misguided or self-serving." Is he right, do you think?

In His Farewell Discourse to His Disciples, Jesus told them:

Jesus said to his disciples, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from

the beginning.

“ ... I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.<sup>1</sup>”

That's a very strange thing to tell them — that it is to their advantage to trade a Jesus they could see and with whom they could talk for an Advocate they do not yet know. “What is this Advocate?” they must have asked themselves. “And why should I prefer him to my friend, my teacher, my rabbi with whom I have traveled so long?”

Two of the most challenging aspects of standing in a pulpit and talking to people for seventeen and a half minutes at a time is trying to convince those in the pews of the reality of the Holy Spirit which cannot be seen nor touched, and further convincing them to trust the

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<sup>1</sup> John 15:26-27

testimony of this Advocate. Trusting your very life to something that you cannot see nor understand is not something just anyone is given to. That is, nevertheless, the undertaking of those called to the name Christian. Jesus promised us an Advocate. We are to live in intimacy with this Advocate, this Holy Ghost, which we can neither see nor understand, and, more, we are to entrust our very lives to Him.

“The Advocate” in this passage is translating the Greek word we pronounce as “The Paraclete”. Christians understand this to be the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. The “Paraclete” or Comforter or Advocate that Jesus promised is the least-discussed aspect of the Trinity today as Francis Chan noted. Forgive me for saying so, but I think that reflects a sort of preference for a God who keeps His distance. God the Father is somewhere “up there”. God the Son is some-

where “back there” in history. God the Holy Spirit is...well, we’ll talk about God the Holy Spirit some other time because we’re not quite comfortable with a here-and-now God.

This preference for a distant God allows us to see Pentecost as “back there” with Jesus as well – a one-time event safely separated from us by the dry pages of history. A Pentecost “back there” is certainly a more comfortable concept than a Pentecost here and now. Pentecost came with terrific disruption to the lives of the people it touched. The gift of the Holy Spirit made superhuman demands on those to whom it was granted and changed, forever, the course of their lives and the course of the world's history. I’m sure that the twelve men gathered in our text today would have had a much easier time of it if they had just been left to their own devices, wished each other well and gone back to fish-

ing. But they didn't. The granting of the Paraclete wasn't about finding an easier time for these men after Christ had charged them. It was about bearing the Holy Spirit into the world to serve the needs of Creation. It was about tending to the suffering of God's Children.

Every Sunday, when we affirm our faith from the Apostle's Creed, we state "I believe in the Holy Ghost." Do we really live out what we affirm that we believe? Do we want the Paraclete in our lives? Living in this rough old world would certainly be easier if we could just be left to our own devices and go back to fishing, leaving the fires of Pentecost "back there." Does the church today have a sense of purpose to match that of these twelve men? In the contemporary church, we need to ask with integrity, "Do we want the Holy Spirit to act today?" If the answer is "No", what business do we have calling ourselves Christian, because Jesus viewed

the gift of the Holy Spirit as crucial to the undertakings that He placed in His Disciples' hands? We need the Holy Spirit just as much, but does the church really own that confession? Do we perhaps think Pentecost and the gift of the Holy Spirit was a one-time event, never to be repeated in our churches, or is this something we should expect to be repeated, time and again, when this rough old world cries out in suffering? Do we not need to re-focus our attention onto Pentecost in our time if we are to undertake that which God has placed in our hands to do, or do we perhaps believe we have nothing to undertake on God's behalf?

I know that I'm not alone in perceiving the contemporary church as dry. We think of ourselves as a church in decline, losing members to the attractions of the world. That may be just a reflection of our short memories. Even during the "good old days" of the American



revolution, church attendance was only something like ten percent. We judge church success by numbers, but that is the wrong balance. That is the measure of worldly success. Whatever the church is to do, it does best when its numbers are least. Recall the story of Gideon, when God insisted that he had brought too many soldiers.

<sup>2</sup> The Lord said to Gideon, ‘The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, “My own hand has delivered me.”’ <sup>3</sup>Now therefore proclaim this in the hearing of the troops, “Whoever is fearful and trembling, let him return home.”’ Thus Gideon sifted them out; twenty-two thousand returned, and ten thousand remained.

<sup>4</sup> Then the Lord said to Gideon, ‘The troops are still too many; take them down to the water and I will sift them out for you there. ...’ <sup>5</sup>So he brought the troops down to the water; and the Lord said to Gideon, ‘All those who lap the wa-

ter with their tongues, as a dog laps, you shall put to one side; all those who kneel down to drink, putting their hands to their mouths, you shall put to the other side.’ ‘The number of those that lapped was three hundred; but all the rest of the troops knelt down to drink water.

<sup>7</sup>Then the Lord said to Gideon, ‘With the three hundred that lapped I will deliver you, and give the Midianites into your hand. Let all the others go to their homes.’

When the church swells and the pews fill, and the church enjoys influence in the affairs of countries, we become prideful, just as God predicted to Gideon that the Israelite forces would, saying “My own hand has delivered me.” When our numbers are low and our influence slight, however, it is then that we can see in the witness of the Paraclete the very hand of God.

So it was with the twelve men gathered. We think of the Apostles as holy men of the church, and such they were, but to the townspeople who heard the roar of a

great wind and gathered to listen, they were anything but holy men. They were a motley crew of out-of-towners and lower class workers, nobody of any importance at all. What they spoke of, in ways such that everyone in attendance heard them in their own language, had nothing to do with making of the church a secular power or baptizing the status quo. They spoke, and would speak, of a radical change to the very world. They spoke to challenge Rome itself and a religious organization which had become calcified and corrupt. Is the church today up to a task like that, I wonder?

Ezekiel, in our text today, prophesied during the exile to Babylon. The body which had been God's people had been flattened, the Temple destroyed, Jerusalem razed and burnt, the people abducted to a distant land. God's people lay dead upon the ground, dry bones, clearly beyond resurrection. Ezekiel reports:

He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord GOD, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

I want you to imagine that this Sunday, the people of Bellefonte and Greenup and Boyd Counties hear a great noise. I want you to imagine that they gather outside this very church, and that this congregation emerges with tongues as of fire over their heads, speaking in other languages. I want you to imagine that this sleepy church suddenly is granted the power of prophecy and exhortation; that the Holy Spirit laid upon this church sinews and muscles and flesh and skin, that the dry church rose before the people of the community resur-

rected.

Imagine yourself in such a position, the eyes of all the community upon you, the fire of the Holy Spirit burning within you, driving you to speak, encouraging and empowering you to confront the injustice that the laws of men impose upon God's children.

How do you feel about that? How would you respond? Scary, huh? Kind of makes you wish for the way things were before the great wind blew, when we convinced ourselves that the only task of a Christian was to seek his or her own salvation by doing a sufficient number of good deeds and living an inoffensive life. As if!

From the valley of the dry bones in Ezekiel to the great wind of Pentecost we are being told that it is through the intervention of the Holy Spirit that sinew and flesh and skin appear upon the dry bones of our efforts. Such a thing is beyond human imagining. To

imagine that you do understand how this can be is to arrogate to yourself God's mysteries. To deny the reality of the work of the Holy Spirit in God's creation is to stubbornly lay with the dry bones in the valley.

Our Pentecost is the Jewish festival of Shavuot. Shavuot celebrates the giving of the Law to Moses. Adherence to the Law kept the Jews segregated, set aside as God's, and identifiable over millennia. We celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit. Attendance to the testimony of the Holy Spirit is that which directs and defines those called to the name Christian.

To ancient people, Jews were identifiable as the people who stubbornly would not worship the gods and who had all these strange customs with food. The Apostles were identifiable as the people who spoke in tongues and did deeds of great power. How are contemporary Christians to be identified? Is it not their stub-

born insistence on justice for those denied justice, on right worship, and on service to others? Is it not their stubborn commitment to care for others, even at personal cost? Jesus charged His Disciples in this manner:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.’

It is in this manner that the Paraclete still leads us. Those who would identify Christians by any sign but this labor in error.

AMEN

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*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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