

The Day of Pentecost, May 20, 2018. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland.
Nigel Taber-Hamilton Ezekiel 37:1-14, Acts 2:1-21, John 15:26-27; 16:4b-15

Today represents a challenge for us: do we focus on the “churchy” part – the so-called “Birth of the Church” – and ignore the rest of the world, which is experiencing significant trauma right now? Or is there a connection that can help us place this day in a context that enters our everyday lives? I believe firmly that the second course is the right course. That means this day needs some background to it.

The Christian cycle – what we often call the “Christian Year” – is really only six months - we begin in early December with Advent, and end, today really, with Pentecost. This “year” is anchored by 3 festivals: Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The first two are easier because they both have to do with something we can relate to: the celebration of new life in the birth of Jesus, and the experience he had of the dark side of living, bringing him to the lowest point of his life: torture, crucifixion, and death; as well as the peak: resurrection. During that last week - as with today - the liturgical color is red; in the former case, red for blood. And, I think, in the latter case too – today – we need to see the link to blood.

Our first reading is soaked in blood – not literally, not now, at least – but metaphorically. Here is this vast valley filled with the results of a great carnage – “the slain,” Ezekiel slips in toward the end, in case you missed it. Most likely that’s a reference to the final slaughter of the remaining Israelites in Judah by a frenzied Nebuchadnezzar in 587 B.C. When Yahweh dropped Ezekiel into this particular “valley of death” – chock full of the massacred – it must have been terrifying. This is not a vision of dancing bones, with a jazz band in the background, and James Weldon Johnson’s “dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones” tripping tunefully along! This is The Wilderness or Spotsylvania Court House, the Somme, or Paschendele., the beaches of D Day or Okinawa – and perhaps most clearly, in places like Auschwitz and Treblinka, Bełżec, and Sobibor (if the ovens had left any) there are valleys and valleys of bones. This is the blood-soaked nightmare of Post Traumatic Stress, a vision so overpowering that Ezekiel is unable to see any possibility of new life, leaving it to Yahweh to respond. This is the paralysis of fear that sees only darkness and dying.

Then again, there’s Acts. And here, too, on one level, you can see the haunting shadow of a post-crucifixion PTSD. One of the consequences of traumatic stress is an almost obsessive attempt to control one’s circumstances and surroundings. I recall the wife of a returning Iraq veteran telling me that even on the hottest of days, in a car with no air-conditioning, her husband insisted on keeping the windows up – ‘cos you learned in Iraq that an open window was a sniper’s invitation, a road-side bomb’s shrapnel entrance point.

In the Acts reading you can see this desire to control played out in Luke’s vision of the descending Spirit – he tries to make it little more safe, a little bit more respectable; something that might be susceptible, perhaps, to being controlled. Here’s a crowd – always a difficult thing for folk with PTSD – and they see the disciples on the edge of getting just a little bit wild; anything could happen. For Luke its an attempt at a fine balance between the obvious exuberant joy of the Spirit’s presence, and fear of the consequences, a fear based on the previous gruesome

experiences of the post-crucifixion, pre-resurrection disciples. - and perhaps a “PRESENT traumatic stress disorder” - the present fear of what the Authorities still might do to quash this nascent movement.

John’s Gospel is one of several passages that talk of the coming of the Spirit – the most striking one, I think, is when the disciples are huddled in the Upper Room after Jesus’ crucifixion “in fear” of the authorities. Despite what happens next, and the obvious and genuine joy it involves, there’s still this lingering sense that the traumatic stress of Jesus’ arrest, show trial, torture and execution hasn’t been washed away. And here, today, in the passage from Jesus’ great last monologue, they’re stunned into silence by Jesus’ talk of the one who will come after him – the “Paraclete” to quote John. “What? You’re leaving us?” And with that stunned silence, an obvious fear for the future.

The truth is that each of these passages surfaces what we don’t want to acknowledge; each seeks to reveal the reality and authenticity of human interaction and response when seen in the light of past trauma. And when you don’t address that past trauma, it becomes a different sort of PTSD: Present Traumatic Stress Disorder.

There’s good news here, though! Each of these passages has a second half to it, a “what happened next, what happened in response” part.

Ezekiel’s “next” is about re-connecting bones, supporting sinews, about everything that makes up a human body coming back together. And yet these freshly restored beings are just zombies, mindless sacks of flesh and bone, not living in any sense that we would recognize as life. Rather like the stunned disciples at Jesus’ Ascension, we might yell at them and say “why are you just standing there?!” It takes the Divine Breath to restore them to full humanity; because God is present, they can breathe. And because God’s breath is in them, they can stand facing an uncertain future, looking forward in hope. The dry bones of defeat and humiliation can become the healthy host of God again. There *is* a future, there is a way back from exile, there is a better “post” place than the one that involved the lingering effects of previous trauma. This is God’s promise to us, God’s answer to that first-asked question: “Can these bones live?” – that those of us who are dry bones, existing in a valley filled with dry bones – a valley of emotional, or spiritual, or psychological fear and death – that we can truly live, in the fullest meaning of that word, that can move beyond what some people have said is an even more devastating PTSD – Present Traumatic Soul Disorder – and become whole. On this day, Ezekiel’s story offers that God-breathed possibility of wholeness. Can you hear the rattling of the dry bones coming together in the dark valleys of your life?

The Acts story contains a miracle. Despite Luke’s description of ‘respectable Spirit possession,’ (how Episcopalian!) a dynamic transformation takes place. But here’s the thing: it’s not what the disciples said about God, it’s what the crowd heard: they heard the gospel in their own language. Luke’s account has, behind it, the Old Testament story of the Tower of Babel. God, the story says, gave the people different languages so that cooperation in the building of this “tower” was impossible. Metaphorically, human community is undermined by Babel.

Now, for Luke, the destructive divisiveness of the Tower of Babel is reversed; the possibility for a new human community beyond the individual trauma and fears of the present time...in this moment that vision suddenly becomes tangible, possible, real. And it becomes tangible, possible, and real for us, too, who live in this present time of trauma and fear, for we, too, are the crowd listening to God's gospel of peace and joy and love and wholeness. Can you let go of the fear and open yourself to this mystic promise?

In John's gospel, our translators tell us that Jesus talks about the "Advocate," but that's not a very helpful translation of the original. In the older versions that title is more mysterious: the "Paraclete." It's not a holy bird related to parrots! The closest translation is this: "***The One Who Stands Beside You.***" Your companion, support, friend, fellow-pilgrim. The One who is there when the night-sweats come, and the dark visions return; the one who walks beside you when the dark valley's shadow casts itself across your path. This is the Spirit of Truth – and that truth isn't some propositional, dogmatic truth, of the sort the Creed proclaims; no this Spirit of Truth is relational, is all about the truth of how we live the way of Jesus, if we can only let go and let the Spirit in.

These readings, taken together, invite us into seeing this day as being about solidarity with one another – a divine/human unity – and about courage, both of which are gifts of the Spirit. The dry bones of our lives need be dry no longer; we need only to breathe in the *rauch*, the wind of God, for transformation to take place. The destructive imposition of Babel is reversed; overturned. Do we have the courage to enter into the new community that Babel's reversal allows for? The One Who Walks Beside Us is here, now, as we live in a culture that can easily provoke a "Present Traumatic Stress Disorder"; are we, the Church, going to stay huddled in the "Upper Room", fearing to go out into a culture that seems eager to dismiss and marginalize us, or are we going to step out boldly into the light of God's dawning grace, welcoming the gift of the Spirit that we celebrate on this day!

This is the promise that's offered on this day to us, and these are the questions asked on this day of us. May we welcome the gift, and answer the questions as those truly transformed by God's Spirit.