

THE BREATH OF LIFE

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Ezekiel 37:1-10
Acts 2:1-8, 12-18

June 9, 2019

Late this afternoon, Mary Barnes and I will head to Lakeside to attend the East Ohio Annual Conference. Pastor Nick tells me he'll be driving over in the morning (being that it is his one year wedding anniversary today, I think we all agree that spending some time with his wife today is a good thing). Throughout the next four days of Annual Conference there will be inspiring daily worship as well as special retirement and ordination services. This year, there will be a presenter sharing with all of us how we might reach new people. There will likely be some discussion about this past February's General Conference, and there will definitely be balloting for lay and clergy delegates to represent East Ohio at the General Conference coming up in 2020. Something that always takes up much of our daily sessions at Hoover auditorium are reports - reports informing us about the ministries, mission and business of the East Ohio Conference. Two out of the many reports that will be given come from the Conference statistician and the Conference Trustees. These reports are short compared to many of the others, but they are never eagerly anticipated. Even though there may be some positive statistics, much of the statistician's report reflects declining membership numbers. The Trustee report then reflects the sad result of such decline as the closing of churches is shared.

These are discouraging reports, and yet once given they are accepted and we go on with business as usual. It's almost as if decline, decay, death are not so tough to accept once you get used to it. Of course, all we really have to do is look at the membership and worship attendance of this church over the past three to four decades and we can see our own local reality of decline. After a while, it's not unusual for churches and individuals like us to almost forget what life and growth looks like.

The prophet Ezekiel creates a very graphic and unforgettable image in our Old Testament lesson - it's an image of death. He describes "dry" bones, which means the bones represent people who have been dead a long time. The bones represent exiled Israel, because as a people separated from God, they had become like dry bones. There was no longer any indication of life, and no one would ever expect or even dream that such bones could live again.

Like many of you here today, I have seen death in the individual; the gradual wasting away of the flesh due to illness, the last breath. Anyone who has seen such death, does not easily forget it. It is an image that becomes ingrained in one's mind. I have also seen death in the church. It's faded, outdated Sunday School quarterly's stacked in a room that hasn't been used for Sunday School for years. Dark hallways where children once hurried to their Sunday School classes on Sunday mornings, now vacant and dusty. Grass growing in the cracks of the church parking lot. Once full pews, now empty and staring back at the preacher in the pulpit week after week, and those members

still remaining preoccupied with keeping the bills paid and a roof over their head. And then that last breath as the "for sale" sign is placed out front.

A few years back, a young, female pastor was approached by her bishop. "I am sending you to this old inner city church," he said. "Some wonderful people there. Yet, they are old, been in decline for the last forty years. Just a handful of them left. They won't expect much from you. Just go there, visit them, and do the best you can."

This was not at all where she had pictured herself in ministry. A few months later, she happened to be visiting in the hospital and stopped by to visit a new mother and her newborn son. "The worst thing," said the young mother "is that we have had to have this baby by ourselves. Our parents live all the way across the country. Since this is our first baby, it's a little scary for us. We have no one to ask what to do next because most of our neighbors are young couples like us. I wish this baby had grandparents close by."

It was as if God had told her what needed to be done, and suddenly, that pastor saw all those gray and white haired people who sat in the church every Sunday morning differently. She talked to the congregation, many of those people felt they were past the time in their life to invest much of themselves in their church and community. However, she convinced a few of them to start visiting in the home of every new baby who was born within a couple miles of the church. Many young couples were happy for support and they appreciate people close by being excited about the birth of their children. What that church had was a surplus of grandparents, a surplus of experience, wisdom and time. That church ended up experiencing a new birth as those "grandparents" eventually brought dozens of young families into the congregation. The Spirit blew and the church that was near death experienced resurrection.

The valley of dry bones, the "valley of the shadow of death" is a frightening, lonely place. Israel in exile was as good as dead, cut off, without hope. And yet, even in that seemingly hopeless situation, Ezekiel's vision told of a wind, a holy, mysterious, life-giving wind blowing through that valley and changing everything.

It is no accident that both the Hebrew and Greek words that are translated "spirit" are also translated as "wind" or "breath." The wind and a breath cannot be seen, but their effects are seen. The Holy Spirit is likened to the wind, uncontrollable, unseen, but having a profound impact. As it blows through us like a breath of new life, we are impacted and those around us are impacted. This wind, this breath of God can do what seems impossible to do, and it can move what seems impossible to move, like a long-established church. God's Spirit is able to change the dynamics of current conditions, break down barriers that seem insurmountable, resurrect the deadness that grips us, and empower us to then move forward with faith.

Last Sunday, we left the disciples in Jerusalem; they were waiting for the promised power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had given them the orders to "be my witnesses... to the ends of the earth," (Acts 1:8) but they had no idea how to step into the future and to actually be disciples in Jesus' absence. There were 120 followers of Jesus who waited for power and direction following Jesus'

ascension. And while they waited, they prayed. It was on their tenth day of praying, the day of Pentecost arrived. Pentecost was Israel's celebration of God's gift of the Law. It was a big, important holiday and Jews from every nation on earth gathered yearly in Jerusalem for the celebration. On that particular Pentecost day following Jesus ascension, the Holy Spirit arrived like "the rush of a mighty wind." (Acts 2:2) The Spirit descended with a sweeping power that came to rest upon each follower as "divided tongues as of fire..." (Acts 2:3) That power prevailed over uncertainty and fear, over language and economic differences. Through Spirit power hope came alive, new possibilities were imagined, and the church was born.

In the past, when this church has been apathetic and slow to move, timid and lacking courage, the Holy Spirit certainly prevailed. The reason I am convinced of this is because this congregation that was incorporated in 1842 is still here. For 177 years this congregation has existed, engaging in ministries of help and hope, and making disciples of Jesus Christ. But things have changed, and we are obviously struggling to fulfill that important directive from Jesus' to be his witnesses and make disciples in our current generation. Whether this congregation is living and thriving a hundred years from now and continuing to make disciples in that generation will be as the result of God's gracious, empowering and leading Spirit blowing through this place and our lives today.

I believe the same Holy Spirit that gave birth to the church universal as well as this church in Chagrin Falls continues to prod and beckon us forward. Perhaps the problem is that we've become too settled down, comfortable with the way things are, and with our pews bolted securely to the floor, and what we need to do is pray like we really want a breath of fresh air to sweep through us and we really want "tongues-of-fire" to rest upon us.

The Holy Spirit experience of unleashed power and God's vision for us revealed may seem a bit overwhelming and even scary for many of us long-established church members. After all, we generally prefer that God not expect too much out of us; we prefer God's breath of new life to not upset that which we consider familiar and comfortable. But the church of Jesus Christ lives and thrives today as always only through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. To be the church of today whatever the age, is to hoist up our sails and go with the Wind.

Pray with me, ***Come, Holy Spirit, surprise us this day and bring new life to our tired, old bones. As we move into the days ahead, give us your vision for this church, and then grant us the power to be you witnesses and to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Amen.***