

Hillcrest Congregational United Church of Christ
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
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Words, Visions, and Dreams
Acts 2:1-8, 16, 21, Ezekiel 37:14, 10-14, John 15:26 –27, 16:7-8, 13

Words, Visions, and Dreams...powerful words, visions, and dreams.

The story Pentecost may be very familiar to you. People receive the Holy Spirit in a dramatic way- reminiscent of the Disneyland fireworks display. There came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and 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.

But what is often not made clear is that this was not the first appearance of the Holy Spirit. The spirit had been present throughout history, guiding the people with powerful words through the prophets. This time though, all the people were gifted with the ability, all were empowered to share the good news with powerful words. And the prophecy of Joel said that when this happened, it would signal the end of the old age, and a new age would begin, the coming of the kingdom of God.

And Jesus cast a powerful vision: When the Advocate comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. A powerful vision of truth and the future.

And what is more powerful than a dream in which a whole people are revived from the dead. Dead dry bones are knit together with flesh, breath is breathed into the flesh, and a whole people, a vast multitude, arise.

But, inevitably they dull the buzz right away. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Far beyond the shadow, this is the valley where death is complete. The bones have no flesh, the flesh has no life. The people have decided: ‘Our bones are dried up, we are old, we are tired, we have no money or people, we have no hope, all our glory is in the past.

And they are right- all their glory is in the past. They had it all, they had a land and a hope and a future and a God who blessed them, yet they turned away from God and each other. They did not keep their eye on the prize, their priorities straight, they lost track of their purpose- to work together to be the people of God.

Yet God declares, “I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord. You see, it is not about the people and their glory. It is about God, and all that God can and will do. No matter how impossible, no matter how hopeless, with God anything is possible. The people just need to show up and be faithful to their relationship with God and to each other. The Spirit of God will revive and empower them, and everything else will follow, to the glory of God.

The word “revival” actually stems from a Latin word meaning “to live again.” This definition implies that something has died.¹ Some of our charismatic brothers and sisters engage in revival meetings. These meetings are known for intense emotive preaching, lively singing,

¹ The African American Lectionary, <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=39>

ecstatic behavior, and enthusiastic congregational response, intended to spark new life in “dead” Christians.

When people are revived, when they are enthused with the spirit, when they are excited about church, they want to take responsibility, they want to be part of the action, and they want to live out God’s call on their lives.

“Revival” can also refer to a spontaneous outpouring of God’s presence on a people, the revival of an entire people, empowered to walk in the Way together.

We too can experience a revival. And it can happen right here in this meeting. We simply have to grab on to the Spirit that is already with us, the Spirit that has already been poured out upon us, and riding the tail of a kite, hold on to God and each other.

For I declare to you today the prophecy of Joel has been fulfilled: God has poured out God’s Spirit upon all of us. Our sons and our daughters have prophesied, our young people have visions and our older people dream dreams. We are called to embody these Powerful Words, these Powerful visions and these Powerful dreams. We are called walk together out of the past and into the beginning of a new age here at Hillcrest, bathed and empowered by the Spirit. Amen.

Pentecost had been the celebration of the spring harvest of barley- Feast of Weeks- people would have traveled to Jerusalem to celebrate from all over- many countries. (Avocado Festival). As the people became less agricultural it became celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai.

"The coming of the Spirit signals nothing less than the beginning of the eschaton, its invasion of the world and its bid for the worlds people."

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

The word "revival" stems from the Latin word *revivere* which means "to live again." This definition implies that something has died.²

Historically, the Great Awakenings of the 18th and 19th centuries were spiritual revivals that sparked new life in "dead" Christians. Revival meetings were prevalent among Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists, and were known for intense emotive preaching, lively singing, ecstatic behavior, and enthusiastic congregational response,

The main emphasis of these revival services was personal conversion to Christ. When people are enthused with the spirit, when they are excited about church, they want to take responsibility, they want to be part of the action, they want to live out God's call on their lives,

"Revival" can refer to a spontaneous outpouring of God's presence on a people, such as the 1906 Azusa Street revival that sparked the spread of the Pentecostal movement. However, it has mainly become institutionalized among African American congregations as a regular part of the church's calendar, manifesting perhaps as fall and spring revival services on consecutive nights.

The general foci of these services are still on conversion and the renewal of the spiritual life of individuals and communities. Moreover, a strong tradition of powerful preaching, usually from an invited guest preacher, heartfelt singing, and stirring testimonies, persists. Some denominations even have ordained revivalists whose main ministry is to preach in congregations with the intended purpose of stirring revival, bringing a "dead" congregation back to life with the help of God.

"Lord, send a revival from the pulpit to the pew." to refer to God renewing the spiritual vitality of a community, but especially of an individual.

When the pastor thought the congregation was dying a slow spiritual death, it was time for revival. The desire for revival was aided by revival services, special services with special speakers that were organized with the intended focus on renewing the spiritual life of a congregation. Typically at these services, folks "sang 'til the power of the Lord came down."

God's reviving power through the Holy Spirit. One could critique this practice of revivalism as solely focusing on the personal and ecclesial level without any influence on the social realm, thus raising the question, "What is revival really?"

For years, the abovementioned congregation has been in numerical and financial decline as the surrounding community changes, yet a call to spiritual revival still rings out. What kind of revival is it if the physical-material aspects of a congregation and community are still dying? What kind of revival is it if the whoop overshadows the concrete help given to hurting communities in society? If the work of the Spirit, the Revivalist, cannot be limited to one domain, then revival itself encompasses all areas of human life. Revival must be more

Whatever type of revival is needed (personal, ecclesial, social), the Spirit will ignite it. The Spirit of my past and present is the same Spirit whom Ezekiel says can resurrect the lives, hopes, and dreams of a community.

The historical backdrop of this passage is a situation of crisis for the "whole house of Israel" (v. 11), not particular individuals within it. Before this section, Israel was already

² The African American Lectionary, <http://www.theafricanamericanlectionary.org/PopupLectionaryReading.asp?LRID=39>

struggling in its relationship with God by defiling the temple and ignoring the holy nature of God's sanctuary, causing God to call them a "whore" (Ezekiel 9). Eventually, the glory of God is removed from Jerusalem (Ezekiel 10), indicating the correlation between the death of Israel, which is pronounced in our passage, and the absence of God. This gives God good reason to command Ezekiel to utter a diatribe and denounce the actions of Israel (Ezekiel 1-24). If this is not enough despair, we hear from a Jewish fugitive that the city of Jerusalem has fallen (Ezekiel 33:21), pointing to the historical fact that in 587 BCE, the city of Jerusalem, the cultural, religious, and economic center of Jewish life, fell to King Nebuchadnezzar. Israel is in a multifaceted exile and, because of this, it is no surprise that they say "our hope is lost" (v. 11).

proclaiming a life-giving word to this community. It is important to realize that 37:1-14 is a part of the restoration discourses in this book which reveal that "trouble don't last always" for the people of Israel. In fact, this passage points to the full-blown restoration of Israel's relationship with God in chapters 40-48

The lifelessness and hopelessness of Israel is described with stark imagery. It is interesting that it is, "the spirit of the Lord" (v. 1) that brings him to the valley of bones, because it was believed that one could be contaminated by coming into contact with the dead (spiritual and physical death of Israel).

Just as prominent as these images of death is the source of life, specifically the Hebrew word for "spirit," "breath," or "wind" (ruach). It occurs ten times and is the main theological motif for Ezekiel. When Ezekiel prophesies to the dead bones, it is clear that the "breath" or "spirit" is linked to new life, because wherever he mentions these terms, except in verse 1, he follows it by saying "you shall live" (vv. 5,6,14), or "they may live" (v. 9), or "they lived" (v. 10). The spirit of God is the source of new life and hope, not any human being. Even when the "bones came together, bone to its bone" (v. 7) with sinews, flesh, and skin, there was no life initially (v. 8). There was just an empty shell until the breath or spirit of life was put into these once dead people (vv. 9-10), painting a reenactment of the primal act of creation, when God formed humanity from the dust of the ground and breathed into their nostrils the breath of life (Gen. 2:7). As in Genesis, it is true here—God is the source of life and revival.

points to the affirmation of the unique power and knowledge of the Lord. God stirs this revival so, "you shall know that I am the Lord." (v. 6), a phrase repeated more than fifty times throughout the book of Ezekiel. Knowing that the Lord is the only true God had been a problem for idolatrous Israel. Humans do not know everything, but God does which could be one reason Ezekiel responds, "O Lord God, you know" when God asks, "Can these bones live?" (v. 3). Ezekiel's response affirms God's power and knowledge as distinct from limited human capacities, setting apart the divine from a mere "mortal" (vv. 3,9,11). Only God is God, and only God's spirit can bring life out of death (Deut. 32:39).

On another level, the collective bodily resurrection of Israel alludes to the biblical witness of physical resurrection where the dead can be raised (1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:18-37; Luke 24). A physical bodily revival will only occur at the end of time, the eschaton. This is a future hope, revival in a holistic sense- all people must be revived- all the people of the earth.

We cannot say, like Israel, "our hope is lost" (v. 11) because the wind of the Spirit is still breathing in our communities; but as we live in the real tension between death and life, we must say like Ezekiel "Lord God, you know" (v. 3), and God knows that when the divine spirit is put within us, we will live.

Hope is not lost. Though in the valley of despair or death, God will not leave us for dead but will give us new life and restore our hope. God will put our lives back together again, as was

the case with the bones. The Spirit of God will breathe in us and bring us up out of our graves. God says, "You shall live."

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sounds: "Hear the word of the Lord" (v. 4), a sudden noise, a rattling, and the bones coming together (v. 7);

Sights: Ezekiel in the middle of a valley, a valley full of bones, Ezekiel being led around bones, very dry bones (vv. 1-2), the bones coming together, bones with sinews and flesh upon them, the bones coming alive and standing on their feet (v. 10);

Smells: The stench of "these slain" (v. 9); and

Textures: Feel the "hand of the Lord that came upon" Ezekiel (v. 1), the "dry" bones (vv. 2, 4), the smooth feel of the "sinew," "flesh," and "skin" (vv. 6, 8), and grainy soil under your feet (v. 14).

III. Other Sermonic Suggestions

Use Langston Hughes' poem. Peace, inside bulletins as a thought for the day.

Peace

We passed their graves:

The dead men there,

Winners or losers,

Did not care.

In the dark

They could not see

Who had gained

The victory.

CELEBRATION OF BAPTISM

Liturgy

Pastor: Jesus came to John to be baptized by him. But John tried to make him change his mind. "I ought to be baptized by you," John said, "yet you have come to me!"

People: Jesus said, "Let it be so for now, for in this way, we shall do all that God requires." So John agreed.

Pastor: As soon as Jesus was baptized, he came up out of the water. Then heaven was opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and lighting on him.

People: Then a voice said from heaven, "This is my own dear Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Pastor: At a later time, they were bringing children to Jesus and asking him to touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, Jesus was indignant, and said to them,

People: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the realm of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the realm of God like a child shall not enter it."

Pastor: And Jesus put his arms around them and blessed them, laying his hands upon them. At another time Jesus said: Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Vows and Affirmation of Faith of the Candidates

Promise of Support by the Church Family

Pastor: Jesus the Christ calls us to make disciples of all nations and to offer them the gift of grace in baptism. Do you, who witness and celebrate this sacrament, promise your love, support, and care to the beloved ones about to be baptized, as they live and grow in Christ?

People: We promise our love, support and care.

Responsive Prayer

Pastor: Let us pray together. We thank you, God for the gift of creation called forth by your saving Word. Before the world had shape and form, your Spirit

moved over the waters. Out of the waters of the deep, you formed the firmament and brought forth the earth to sustain all life.

People: **In the time of Noah, you washed the earth with the waters of the flood, and your ark of salvation bore a new beginning. In the time of Moses, your people Israel passed through the Red Sea waters from slavery to freedom and crossing the flowing Jordan to enter the promised land.**

Candidates and Families:

In the fullness of time, you sent Jesus who was nurtured in the waters of Mary's womb. Jesus was baptized by John in the water of the Jordan, became living water to a woman at the Samaritan well, washed the feet of the disciples, and sent them forth to baptize all the nations by water and the Holy Spirit.

Pastor: God of Love, bless this water through your Holy Spirit. Save those who confess the name of Jesus the Christ that sin may have no power over them. Create new life in Desiree and Jennifer, baptized this day that they may live your way, taught to us by Jesus. Glory to you, eternal God, the one who was, and is, and shall always be, your world without end. Amen.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Prayer of Blessing and Thanksgiving

Pastor: Let us pray for Desiree and Jennifer baptized today. We give you thanks, O Holy One, mother and father of all the faithful for these beautiful young women and for the grace acknowledged here today in water and the Holy Spirit. Gracious God, you have filled the world with joy by giving us the gift of Jesus. May Desiree and Jennifer be filled with joy; may they never be ashamed to confess a personal faith in you.

People: **Bless their families and everyone who loves them. May we always show gratitude for the life you have given by loving and caring for Desiree and Jennifer. Bless us all and make us your faithful people. Unite us in the peace of Christ and the company of the Holy Spirit.**

Pastor: Embrace us all as sons and daughters in the one household of your love. Grant us grace to receive, nurture, and befriend your beloved children in the body of Christ. Give to the newly baptized and all of us: strength for life's journey, courage in time of suffering, the joy of faith, the freedom of love, and the hope of new life; through Jesus the Christ, who makes us one.

All: **Amen.**

Celebration of Confirmation

Vows and Affirmation of Faith by the Candidates

Affirmations of Support and Faith by the Church Family

Pastor: Let us, the church family of Hillcrest Congregational United Church of Christ, express and affirm our mutual ministry in Christ.

People: We promise you our continuing friendship and prayers as we share the hopes and labors of the church of Jesus the Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit may we continue to grow together in God's knowledge and love and be witnesses of our risen Savior.

Pastor: Let us all pray together.

All: Almighty God, who in baptism received these your servants into the church, forgave their sins, and promised them eternal life, increase in them the gifts of your Holy Spirit. Grant them love for others, joy in serving you, peace in disagreement, patience in suffering, kindness toward all people, goodness in evil times, faithfulness in temptation, gentleness in the face of opposition, self-control in all things. Thereby strengthen them for their ministry in the world; through Jesus the Christ, our Savior. Amen.

Pastor: Let us join together in the covenant for Hillcrest Congregational Church.

Many: I give myself freely to the love of God and neighbor, and take Hillcrest Congregational Church to be my church. In covenant with all other members of this Church, and the United Church of Christ, I promise to walk together in faithfulness and Christian love. I promise that, so far as I am able, I will participate in the worship of this Church, observe its benevolences and endeavor through study, service, and prayer to make this a fruitful body of Christians.

Pastor: Let us join together in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray.

All: Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Ritual of Confirmation

Prayer of Blessing and Thanksgiving

Pastor: Now let us pray all pray together.

All: Eternal God, we praise you for calling us to be your servant people and for gathering us into the body of Christ. We thank you for sending to us Emily, Derrick, Scott, Megan, Desiree and Jennifer, so that we may work together in serving the needs of others. Confirm in us the power of your covenant that we may live in your Spirit, share regularly in worship, and so love each other that we may have among us the same mind which was in Christ Jesus the Christ, to whom be all honor and glory. Amen.

Pastor: Almighty and ever living God, may your hand be over your servants confirmed today. May your Holy Spirit ever be with these young people. Lead them the knowledge and obedience of your word so that they may serve you in this life and dwell with you in the life to come; through Jesus the Christ.

All: O God, we thank you for calling us to faith and for gathering us into the church, the body of Christ. We thank you for your people gathering in this local church and rejoice that you have increased our community of faith. Together may we live in the Spirit, building one another up in love, sharing in the life and worship of the church, and serving the world for the sake of Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Pastor: Go in the peace of Christ.

All: Thanks be to God.