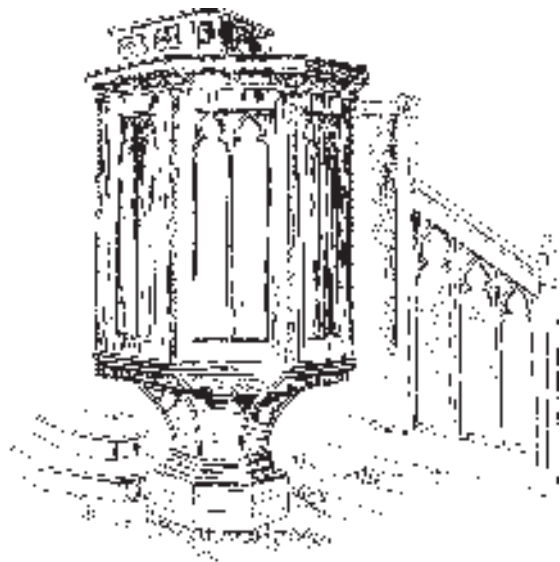


April 11, 2010

Westminster Presbyterian Church



Sermons

Dying to Live

By The Reverend Laurie Brubaker Davis

Ezekiel 37:1-14
Romans 6:3-11

Welcome to “National Associate Pastor Preaching Day”! That’s right, today, the first Sunday after Easter, has a special code name inside the church industry. No, it’s not really “National Associate Pastor Preaching Day.” But I’ll let you in on a little trade secret: we do call it, “Low Sunday.” It ranks right down there with the Sunday after Christmas. Perhaps lower. Therefore, it’s the perfect Sunday for all Head of Staff pastors to take a well-deserved vacation. It is, after all, the “Sunday after.”

The Sunday *after* all the hoopla and high excitement of Easter. The Sunday *after* the Sunday when we pull out all the stops and crank up the carillon to add to the splendor. And still, we add more. On Easter we bring in the big brass: trumpets, trombone, tuba and horn to raise the roof with glorious, bright harmonies. And to top it off, we get to hear Brent Manley add the loud crashing cymbals to this symphony of sound. Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

To celebrate the victory so deep, so broad, so high—God’s definitive triumph over sin and death—our story must be shouted from the rooftops and sung at triple fortissimo. If ever there was a time to embody the exuberance of Psalm 150, it is on the day of Jesus’ resurrection. Psalm 150 with its seven

exclamation points. The Psalm that builds up to the verse: “Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals!” It then ends with the expansive phrase, “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

But what about when we *can't* breathe? What about when we're cruising along, thinking we're doing okay, then out of nowhere, a word like “cancer” or “accident” or “divorce” or “laid-off” gets put in a sentence with our name or the name of someone we love? Or maybe your husband is a coal miner in West Virginia and he goes off to work at the Upper Big Branch mine, like any other day. But on his shift there is an explosion and he never comes home. And your life is never the same as it was. We've all had these kind of moments. Moments that can turn into days and weeks and even months—times when it seems like the oxygen gets sucked out of our souls.

Our first scripture lesson today, on “Low Sunday” is set way down low in the Valley of Dry Bones. The Lord sets Ezekiel down in a valley that was full of very many, very dry bones. Not just a little dead. Very dead. No air. No breath. No one is praising the Lord here. No one has any breath. No one except for God, who creates breath. And God's prophet, Ezekiel.

Right there comes this magnificent vision, complete with the clickety-clack of bones snapping together, muscles forming and attaching, then flesh covering and encasing them, God's word and then God's breath brings those bones to life! New life! We find the same verb in the creation story in Genesis 2:7 “then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and *breathed* into his nostrils the *breath* of life; and the man became a living being.”

The Lord gives Ezekiel this vision to deliver to his people, the people of Israel, who have been exiled. They have become a people who say,

*Our bones are dried up,
and our hope is lost;
we are cut off completely.*

They are paying for their sins and the outlook is bleak. It seemed like all was lost. And yet, that was the very moment when God gives them a whole new hope and vision. They are *not* cut off, their hope is *not* lost, nor are their bones really as dried up as they think.

Both Jews and Christians place this Valley of Dry Bones prophecy in the bedrock epicenter of their liturgical life and calendar. It is the Torah reading on the Sabbath of the Passover week in the Jewish calendar. This is the text that is read on the holy day of their high holy week, when they remember how God freed them from slavery. For Christians, this story is traditionally read during our Holy Saturday Easter late-night Vigil service, in anticipation of Easter morning, when we celebrate how God freed us from our slavery to sin. We also read it on Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit blew into Jerusalem and birthed the Christian church. That was another loud, terrific, confusing, amazing, disorienting, kind of day.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Before the mighty winds of Pentecost came, the Easter evening moment when the Risen Christ breathed on his scared disciples locked away in a room. As he breathed into them, the once dead man breathing now new life into “walking dead” men, with the words “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven” (John 20:22-23).

What kind of power were they given in that breath? What kind of power are we given to breathe in here? Nothing less than the power to forgive. The power to feed, to heal, to even raise the dead. The power to bridge the gaps and polarities that threaten to tear apart families, communities, our nation and our world. From the breath of the Risen Christ comes the power to see ourselves and to see others differently. In Paul's letter to the Romans he writes in verse 11, "So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."

That sounds so good. But how do we really do that? How does this being buried with Christ in baptism and being raised with Christ supposed to work? How do we get from the Valley of Dry Bones to resurrection ground? How can we possibly consider ourselves alive to God in Christ Jesus, breath-by-breath? I certainly don't have a lock-step formula to offer. I don't think one exists. God's algebra of grace is infinite in its variables and equations.

But here is what I do know, from my own life, from my study of scripture, and my work as a pastor. When we are at our lowest points, when all of a sudden everything seems up for grabs or our certainties start to fail us, this is when our spiritual growth spurts often happen. That low ground is fertile soil for our souls. These are the times when we realize that God really means it! That God is the one who will never forsake us, no matter what. We start to think, maybe God really *is* stronger than death. And we become mysteriously more open to new ways of considering ourselves and others.

What GPS route will get from the low ground, the Valley of Dry Bones and no oxygen, to the resurrection high ground where God's love and mercy rule the day and the night? What is the best course to get from wherever we are, to the land where the power to forgive and be forgiven is breathed in and out? Look no further than the cross on our communion table.

The cross stands for the one person who will never forsake you. The one person who will not let you go. The cross reminds us that God really meant it. God's promise all the way since Noah and the rainbow, to never forsake or give up on any one of us, or on all of us. But the cross *also* challenges us. The cross asks us, "Do we really mean it? Or are we just going through the motions? Are we going to be a plus sign for the kingdom of God?"

Sara Miles, author of *Take this Bread* and her second book just published, *Jesus Freak: Feeding, Healing, Raising the Dead*, came to Christ as a young adult who was raised to be resistant and skeptical of all things religious. That all began to change the day she took communion bread in her mouth and tasted the presence of the Risen Christ. She let God propel her into starting a ministry of feeding the homeless in what became her church in San Francisco. Her books tell the story. I want to share with you today her words at the end of her second book as she reflects on this change in her and the power of the risen Christ at work in others who realize God means it, and do their best to mean it, too.

There's often a moment when I'm hanging out with a group of Christians—usually liberal Christians, the kind who care about global warming and inclusive language—and I see them glance at me as if I'm a total freak. I've embarrassed them by talking too much about Jesus. As if he were real... I do mean it. I can't fully explain who Jesus is, but I see him at work everywhere, still breathing in all kinds of

people: poor men, crazy women, middleclass retired couples, little kids. They're feeding, healing, forgiving, raising the dead.... This is what Christians do every Sunday, after all, when we stand around in our boring churches, eating little wafers or pieces of whole wheat pita, saying aloud that Christ is risen. It's what we do whenever we continue in simple, literal acts: breaking bread, praying without hope of perfect outcomes, admitting our weaknesses, and loving people who don't deserve it. It's what we do when we remember that death is not the end. (From Jesus Freak by Sara Miles pp. 163-165.)

Easter's trumpets and cymbals proclaim: death is not the end! God has triumphed in victory over death by raising Jesus from the grave. Whether it is dead bones in a valley, or God's son crucified on a cross: new life starts with death. For God, death can be a beginning. Not only at the end of our physical life on earth, but every day we let die all that separates us from being alive to God in Christ.

Are you dying to live? Are you wondering how you could be more alive to God in Christ Jesus? What are you holding onto for dear life? It may be the very thing that is sucking the oxygen out of your soul. What is it that you are unwilling to let go of? Maybe it's the way you consider yourself. Or maybe it's the way you think about another person, or group of people, that you need to let die. Maybe it's an ideology or a mindset that God is calling you to let go. What little death is standing between you and a new life where you're breathing in and out the breath of forgiveness power? What is God calling you to let go of, today?

In closing, let us continue pondering that question as we sing together the first stanza of the hymn "Breath on Me Breath of God." Let us sing and pray together:

*Breathe on me breath of God,
Fill me with life anew,
that I may love what Thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do. Amen.*