

Can These Bones Live?
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
May 31, 2009
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-15
Acts 2:1-3

Is God just a delusion, as Sigmund Freud argued?

Is what we interpret as the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives really a chemical reaction in our brains?

If we pray and meditate for hours every day, can we sculpt our brains to be more receptive to the Holy Spirit, to be, in effect, closer to God? Or is that just a strong form of wishful thinking?

Was Moses hallucinating when he talked to the burning bush?

Did the apostle Paul encounter God in the Holy Spirit on the road to Damascus or was his vision the by-product of an epileptic seizure, as some physicians who have studied Paul's ailments believe?

These are just some of the questions that sit at the intersection of faith and science. Thanks to recent technology that allows scientists to observe brain functions, we can track how our religious thoughts light up different lobes in the brain. And because we know generally what the different lobes do, some scientists believe they are getting close to understanding what really happens when we have a spiritual experience.

It sounds like an oxymoron, a self-contradicting phrase, but they call this the "science of spirituality" and it is more advanced than ever. And more than just lab results are at stake. Polls and surveys find that 50% of us believe we have had a spiritual experience, an encounter or connection with our creator that we can't quite explain.

Still ... most scientists doubt they will ever be able to prove – or disprove – the existence of God as communicated through the Holy Spirit. So, as long as the spirit evades science, it seems our belief in all things spiritual remains a matter of faith ... which, if you ask me, is where it belongs.

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If you didn't come to church today knowing that it is Pentecost Sunday, the day we celebrate the gift of God's Holy Spirit in our lives and in our world, you know it now.

Last week, we read the story in the book of the Acts of the Apostles in which Jesus is taken up into heaven. But before he goes, Christ promises his followers that they will be upheld and sustained by a new form of the power of God. The Holy Spirit completes the Trinity, God's three-part self-revelation.

We Presbyterians, we frozen chosen, should confess at least once a year that we don't always know what to do with the spiritual side of our faith. Pentecost Sunday is as good a time as any for that confession. And I and my white-bread, starched-shirt and horn-rimmed spectacted self should lead that confession.

We lifelong Presbyterians know the spirit, don't get me wrong. But we're more apt to tune in to the spirit with our heads instead of our hearts. I would ask for an "amen" from the guilty on that ... but I know there are some other lifelong Presbyterians out there and that might make them uncomfortable.

We will always have Wilma to help us along, though. Thanks be to God.

However we were raised, whatever we think or feel about the Holy Spirit, we can take confidence that God is present in the Spirit, right now. I say that not as some kind of presumptuous claim, but because Christ said "I will always be with you," and he is, in and through the Spirit. So the Spirit is here on any Sunday, which we recognize by always having a lighted candle in worship, a symbol of a flame fed by the very breath of God.

Then there are those Sundays when the Spirit seems larger, more present, like a weaver connecting our songs, prayers and hearts together in a way that can't be planned. On those Sundays, you say to me or to each other, "We had *church* today" ... and we know what we mean.

Part of the challenge of some of us in the frozen chosen is that making way for the Spirit requires giving up our sense of control, even though it never is anything more than a false sense.

Music helps us do that and we are led so wonderfully well in that giving-up by Smitty, Thomas and our devoted, ever-generous, ever-joyous choir. In our music, we surrender ourselves to our senses, we are called out of our brains and into our hearts and, if we dare go so far, all the way to our souls.

Our music at Caldwell is such a gift of God. When so many churches are struggling to find a balance between the old and the new, the classic and the contemporary, this blend of music we have – a balance crafted before I got here – seems to reach so many of you. We should always hold it gently in our hands, as the gift that it is, while also always listening for the Spirit to guide how we enjoy music in worship and glorify God with it.

So, what about the role of the spirit in preaching and interpreting the written Word of God?

We Presbyterians have historically put a great deal of emphasis on education. Back home in Scotland, the Presbyterian preacher was often the most educated man in town and that tradition came with them to the new land. In Charlotte, Queens University and Davidson College are just two of the legacies of this ministry of education.

I say all that because you won't see me speaking in tongues and handling snakes while shouting that the Holy Spirit will protect me. My wife accuses me of having no common sense but I have read books that tell me not to try that.

No, we leave that to some of our other brothers and sisters in other church traditions. We believe God gave us not only our souls and senses but the miracle of the brain. As Christ said in the Gospel of John: "You shall love the Lord with all your heart, and all you soul and all your mind."

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So, we are called to use our minds to understand how the Holy Spirit works in us and through us as the Body of Christ.

Often on Pentecost Sunday, we focus on the scripture passage Wilma read from the New Testament, the familiar story of how the spirit descends on the apostles like the rush of a wind, equipping them to take the good news of the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

But this Sunday, I am more drawn to this strange tale we read in Ezekiel. Ezekiel lived about 600 years before Christ. Among the Bible's many characters, he stands apart because he was a "both-and" ... both a priest and a prophet. That made him dangerous and controversial. In fact, according to one Jewish tradition, you had to be 30 years old before you could read the book of Ezekiel ... because this is some weird, wild stuff.

The Spirit of the Lord comes down on Ezekiel and sweeps him away to a valley full of dry bones. God said to Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?”

Ezekiel must have been good on his feet because, when faced with such an odd question, he gives a non-committal answer. “O Lord, God, you know.”

Then, if it wasn't strange enough already, God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones about how God is about to bring them back to life. That seems to get the bones' attention. They rattle around, come back together and flesh and sinew appear on them. They are a vast multitude, Ezekiel says, reformed and ready for action. But they just stand there, like zombies in a bad black and white horror flick. They are without breath, without life, without purpose.

Freeze the story right there for a moment. Are you reminded of anything from last week's story about the Ascension of Christ? As we read in the first chapter of Acts:

“... as the disciples were watching, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly to men in white robes stood by them. They said, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven.”

That's got to be one of the most memorable lines in scripture, because it is so direct. The two men in white robes didn't say, “Get your thumb out of your ear and get going,” but they might as well have.

It resonates because we've all been there, right?

To be sure, there is nothing wrong with standing around and gazing up at the sky. We're called to be still at times, to abide with God and those closest to us in peace and quiet so that we may be restored for service. As we usher in summer, life at least has a fighting chance at slowing down for some us.

When it comes to serving in the church, if you haven't heard it from me already, my number-one rule is “Don't burn out” because we've all see it happen too many times. We give church everything, almost every spare minute ... and, before we know it, we become individually, maybe even and collectively, like those zombie bodies in Ezekiel. We've got to pace ourselves. Serving God is a marathon, not a sprint.

But, let's admit it. At some time or another, we *have* just *stood around* or at least done something like it. We might come to church on Sundays but never join. Or we come to

worship, to be filled with the spirit, but then we take the spirit home with us like a pet rather than bring it back to share it in the form of service to others.

Don't get me wrong – this is an active and hard-working church with an out-sized heart for mission. But at times we need fresh infusions of volunteers for our growing ministries. Your leadership has worked hard to avoid being just another 80-20 church ... where 80 percent of the work gets done by the same 20% of the people.

We are not that ... but we are at a point where our capacity to serve God in serving others depends on new volunteers stepping up. Your leaders see it. I see it. If we have failed at keeping our inward and outward ministries focused and disciplined, so be it. We can trim our sails and slow down and tack to the side. But I think that there is more wind here, the breath of the Spirit moving in and around us, enabling us to serve just as the spirit descended on the disciples.

If now is not the time for you, then that is completely understandable. Each of us has those times.

But if you believe you have been given gifts by God that can be used here – in mission and justice, in caring for members of our congregation, in organizing our ministries, in singing in the choir, in teaching our children, in keeping up our buildings and grounds -- then I hope you will. Contact me or any of the members of the session, whose names are on the back of your bulletin.

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God asked Ezekiel whether all those old bones could live again and Ezekiel said, “O Lord, God, you know.”

Maybe Ezekiel was dodging the question. Maybe not. Maybe he trusted God all along. But one thing he did know, without a doubt, was how to follow instructions.

After assembling the bones and the flesh and sinew, all they needed was breath. God commanded Ezekiel:

“Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, 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”

Some days we may feel like the slain, in need of new breath. But on other days we may feel like Ezekiel, asking God to use us to help bring life to others through the power of the Spirit. God brings us life in either case.

If there ever were a church that has felt the rush of the wind of the spirit filling it with new life and energy, this is it. Few churches can vouch for the gift of the spirit quite like this one.

What, then, would we say, when God asks, "Can these bones live?"

Did you see the news last week about the girl that won the national spelling bee? The word she had to spell was "laodicean." It means lukewarm or indifferent, especially in matters of religion.

The word originates in Scripture. There was a small church, probably in a house church, in the community of Laodicea in the Roman province of Asia Minor. The apostle Paul refers to it in one of his epistles, as does the author of the Revelation of John. It seems the Christians there lacked any zeal or energy. They were neither hot nor cold about their faith, lukewarm.

Friends, when God asks, "Can these bones live?" let us not be accused of being laodicean. We know God is not just a delusion, a trick of the mind, a hallucination or the echo of that burrito we had for lunch, because we have seen evidence to the contrary right here at the corner of Fifth and Park.

So, to all who are able, let us not stand around like lifeless bags of bones, lacking the energy and inspiration of the Spirit.

Let us not spend all of our time gazing up into the sky, as beautiful as it can be.

"For the Lord said, I will put my spirit within you and you shall live."

Amen

