

Re-Membering
Ezekiel 37:1-14
May 23, 2021 (Pentecost)
First Presbyterian, Luling

Today feels momentous. The last time we were gathered together in this sanctuary for regular Sunday morning worship was mid-March of 2020, almost exactly 14 months ago. I've said before, and I guess I'll be saying forever, that time is weird. It seems like we were just here last week, but then I stop and think and realize how things have changed. Most immediately, I am missing people. I bet you are too. And then in the next breath, I'm so thankful for the people who God has brought to us in the last fourteen months. I'll admit that getting back into the merry-go-round of the Sunday morning routine at our house was a little rough this morning. Leading worship from my kitchen table had really started to seem like a normal thing to do. I will not miss at all, not in the least, trying to deal with Daisy's antics and barking habit during worship, though! I know each of you probably had both comforts that you'll miss and occasionally return to for at-home worship, as well as distractions. Though it's something we got used to, I think, it has felt like our fellowship was sort of broken into pieces, or maybe loosened is the right word, rather than broken. If we've learned anything these last fourteen months, it's that we can't predict what will happen this afternoon, much less next week or month or year.

It's tempting, so very tempting, to try to pick up where we left off and continue on as if the last fourteen months didn't happen. It would be so comforting. But things aren't the same. More importantly, we aren't the same.

Beth read the familiar Pentecost story from Acts this morning, the passage in which the gathered and diverse worshippers receive the Holy Spirit in the forms of wind and fire and different languages. This Spirit is promised to be the presence of the Triune God among them, both binding them together and sending them out to proclaim the good news. That same Spirit gathers us here together this morning, in various ways, binds us together, and sends us out to proclaim the good news.

For Pentecost this time around though, the lectionary also suggests this reading from Ezekiel, his vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones. It's a wonderfully written and vividly described vision. Ezekiel was writing from exile. The Israelites were separated from their land, their Temple, their king, from all the things that

God had promised them. And so as a people, they felt like that valley of dry bones.

God plops Ezekiel down in this valley full of bones. There is no life in them. The bodies that once covered the bones are long gone, the bones themselves are not just exposed but dried out. It has been a long time since these bones were part of living bodies. God gives Ezekiel time to look around, to absorb just what a hopeless place he is in, and Ezekiel knows that feeling, because it's the feeling of an entire generation of Israelites. Dry. Dead. Broken loose from the things that had held them together. Hopeless.

And then God asks Ezekiel: can these bones live? And I love Ezekiel's answer. It's clear he's dealt with God and God's questions before. He doesn't say: of course not—they're long past living. Because he knows that God could prove him wrong. So he answers the only safe way, "God, only you know."

God instructs Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones, and bone connects with bone, flesh and tendons and muscles appear, and the bones connect to the bones, and they hear the word of the Lord. But they do not yet live. It's not till God breathes the breath of the spirit into them, just as God had done at creation, that they live. Breath and spirit and wind are all the same word in Hebrew. So God puts breath into them, puts spirit into them, and they live.

The bodies that had been dismembered, taken apart, their connecting parts decayed and gone, are now whole again. And not just put back together, but given new life. The community that had been left for dead, hopeless, disconnected, dis-membered, has now been reconstituted, given new life, renewed and resurrected. This is a vision of hope for Ezekiel to share with his fellow exiles.

May it be a vision of hope for us, too. I actually think we as a congregation have done an excellent job at maintaining the ties that bind us together. We've invested significant time each week into checking in with each other intentionally. This could happen because of our size—larger congregations weren't able to do this in the same way that we could. But you've also taken initiative and reached out to each other with emails and texts and phone calls and prayers. As you've always done, you demonstrated your love for each other in concrete ways.

Even so, as hard as we've worked at remaining one body, as much as we've tried to incorporate everyone into the body, those ties have been strained by not being able to be together as we were used to. We've found ways around that separation, but as I said at the beginning of the sermon, maybe our fellowship

wasn't broken, but loosened. Or to put it in the framework of the valley of the dry bones, our body of believers was dis-membered, taken apart and scattered.

As we come together this Pentecost Sunday, it's not our presence in the same building, or on the same screen, that will re-member us, that will put us back together. It's not remembering what things used to be like or what we used to be like. It's not even our intentional work on strengthening the ties that bind us together. Nothing that we do is going to re-member us, put us back together. Remembering who we are, and whose we are, is getting close to what will re-member us. It is God that will re-member us. But those bodies in the Valley of the Dry Bones had to go through another step, right? God will breathe the spirit into us, and we will be re-membered and we will live a renewed life together. Now hear the word of the Lord.