

## May 23, 2021 – Pentacost

Ezekiel 37:1-14

Acts 2:1-21

### *The New Algebra*

*"The zero hour breeds new algebra."* Amos Wilder

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Langston Hughes challenged us by asking, “What happens to a dream deferred?”

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?<sup>1</sup>

What develops when hope, ambitions, callings, and possibilities are deferred, put off, postponed, or frustrated? Were they faulty hopes? Do overdue dreams turn into heavy, unfulfilled yearnings that lose their potency and never blossom into fullness, forever vexing us?<sup>2</sup>

A year after George Floyd was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, there are families, whole communities, even the entire nation, still wrestling with the question, “What would have happened if...?” Since last June, our nation and our humanity have had to confront the critical question of dreams deferred. Myriad direct actions, court proceedings, protests, demonstrations, investigations, religious gatherings of all sorts, Black Live Matter signs, political pandering, burned businesses, and awkward conversations have resulted in more questions than answers—and in relatively little change.

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<sup>1</sup> Langston Hughes, "Harlem" from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*. Copyright © 2002 by Langston Hughes.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, F. Willis, “Can These Dry Bones Become a Movement?,” *The Christian Century*, February 9, 2015

More time has been spent processing, planning, and politicking than producing change to the systems, leadership, and culture that gave rise to this communal crisis. What if?

Ezekiel 37 explores the “what if.” The bones in the valley are the only remains of a community torn apart by tragedy, not unlike Minneapolis or Ferguson or Elizabeth City. Both the dried bones and the desert landscape suggest an ordeal of extraordinary proportions, a devastating cataclysm. It also exposes that cultural assumptions and practices have perpetuated endless cycles of warfare and violence and an attitude that other humans are disposable. The results of collective neglect in Louisville and Detroit and elsewhere have left us in a disheartened state of mind, struggling to regain our ability to coexist, understand, listen, trust, or sustain hope in one another. All the while we wonder, “What if...?” “What happens to a dream deferred?” Plus, the global coronavirus pandemic has diminished our confidence and crushed our resilience, and there is no clear path to success, especially for communities like ours that prefer the questions more than the answers. What if?

In Ezekiel we hear a familiar story of the ancient Near East: a story of conflict and war. Of a battle in which one side lost decisively and bodies were left to decay in the desert sun. When Ezekiel sees this valley of very dry bones, he sees the violent, devastating history of his people—the Israelites. He sees the Babylonian army laying siege to his home ground of Jerusalem; two years of non-stop attacks. He sees his family and friends trapped inside the city, dying of hunger and disease. He sees the Temple destroyed and the leaders of his faith detained. His fellow citizens are killed. And those not killed rounded up, with him, and forced into exile in Babylon. What if?

It must have been a devastating moment. *“Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely (Ezekiel 37:11).* Amos Wilder would agree. The older brother of playwright Thornton Wilder of *“Our Town”* notoriety, Amos Wilder was an accomplished poet, champion tennis player, minister and notably a New Testament scholar at Harvard Divinity School. I introduce him to you so we may, at the critical point that Pentecost, a waxing and waning global pandemic, continuing economic turbulence and a national racial reckoning provide, ponder his wonderful statement: ***The zero hour breeds new algebra.***<sup>3</sup> Every word in this line of poetry is thick with intent. *The zero hour* is the moment when we reach the lowest point of possibility and we have no reason to anticipate any good prospect. The zero hour is empty of capacity and brings us into the depth of despair. In ancient Israel, the zero hour was the exile of defeat, destruction, and displacement when the holy city and its temple were destroyed and God’s promises had run out. Israel had no possible future:

*But Zion has said, “The Lord has forsaken me,  
my Lord has forgotten me” (Isaiah 49:14).*

*They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely (Ezekiel 37:11).*

That moment of despair is echoed in the New Testament story in the execution of Jesus. In the wake of that Friday, the disciples could assert: *“But we had hoped “that [Jesus the Christ] was the one to redeem Israel” (Luke 24:21).*

So hope was gone. And that same moment of hopelessness has arisen for us individually and collectively when our lives are broken beyond repair. Just now, of course, amid economic ruin, racial reckoning and the still-present virus, we are, in our society, at something of a zero hour. And yet as the

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<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, Walter, “The Zero Hour Breeds New Algebra,” *The Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2021.

vaccine takes hold, and leaders continue to assure, “We will get through this together,” and there are some grounds to see an economic revival at hand. To be sure, none of these moments of failure is comparable to the depth of the cosmic shutdown of that crucifixion Friday (Mt. 27:51-54, Luke 23:44-45), but we do imagine by equivalent. The work of our faith is the embrace of that zero hour.

The desolate landscape of bones looked familiar to Ezekiel. But what God did with the bones was anything but familiar. It’s an inversion of the usual course of events. Ezekiel watches the bones come together. Instead of a battlefield becoming a bone yard, Ezekiel watches as the Spirit of God transforms a bone yard into a “vast multitude” of people standing on their feet. The wind begins to blow and there’s an eerie rattling of the bones as they come together. They attach to one another and add muscle and flesh as they rise from the desert floor. Then the wind fills the lungs, the color returns to a million pairs of cheeks and the spark to a million pairs of eyes and the breath of life to a million pairs of lungs.

God’s capacity to produce newness out of death is expressed most clearly by Paul who writes that the creator God is the one “...*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist*” (Romans 4:17).

The capacity for newness flowing from the zero hour is uniquely in the gift of God. What emerges in this hidden process, for Ezekiel, and for Jesus, and for Paul, is according to Wilder, “*new algebra*.” The newness does not incorporate any of our old math skills or our usual explanations. What we get is a new world of reality that does not answer to our old convictions. In the zero hour what is “bred” is a wonder that defies our old controls. The over-used word for such a wonder is “miracle.”

Just now, surely, in the midst of the virus, racial reckoning and an economic pivot-point, we are at a zero hour in our society, in our church and in the world. That zero hour induces fear, anger, and even hoarding. In that moment of fear, anger, and hoarding, however, when we have eyes to see, we see the new algebra working the numbers in fresh ways. In the new algebra, the silenced and the invisible among us count. In the new algebra, there is no miserliness in the face of deep human need. Through the new algebra, we may notice the emergence of new neighborly policies that treat all others like neighbors. The old rules, though, continue to have a deep grasp on our imagination. As a result, we are fearful that someone somewhere will get something for nothing. In the old math, we regard “mine” as “mine,” not ever to be shared. In the old math, we protect privilege, and color, and degrees and advantage. But the new breeding goes on in spite of us. And then, from time to time, we are amazed as was Ezekiel, as were the disciples and the crowds around Jesus.

For Ezekiel, then, deep human suffering collided with God’s promises, and the result was a vision of the future—dry bones coming to life—that remains with us today on Pentecost. The deeper the problem, the greater the glory of God’s redemptive work, I believe.

The question for the church to answer today on Pentecost is, “Can these bones live?” Yet we are not left to do so alone. Ezekiel replies, “O Lord God, you know.” What follows is a call to speak divine

inspiration to the discouraged, a command to proclaim hope to a place and a people deemed hopeless, hapless, and helpless. As *The Message* puts it, “Prophesy over these bones: ‘Dry bones, listen to the Message of God!’”

So is it possible to say even more? Is it possible to say, like Ezekiel, that the dislocation, isolation and pain of this season can lead to a grander vision for a reinvigorated people of God?

Is it possible to say that at the end of all this, we won’t simply resume our work but expand and grow the church with fresh confidence in God’s providence? *I for one am anxious to see what kind of church emerges from this trial. I pray that it will be glorious.*

Dare we speak of joy and resurrection in a world that feels like it’s still at least partially under the shadow of death?

And yet, in bringing new life, there was a role for Ezekiel to play. And surely there is a role for us in God’s continuing efforts to bring healing and wholeness in the world. As our nation marks the one-year anniversary of the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the coronavirus pandemic loosens its grip on our lives, our communities and our congregation, there is surely a role for us to play re-creating a place for gathering and worship. There is a role for us to in bring compassion, justice and a hearty welcome to all God’s people. There is work yet to be done, and God is calling us to do it.

What is the source of this coming joy? Jesus’ resurrection. What is it, then, that gives hope to the church in the midst of this pandemic? The resurrection of the dead and the life everlasting. It is God’s promise, written in the life-blood of his son, that he loves us with a love stronger than death and that at the last, he will call us from the grave to see him as a friend and not an enemy. What is the assurance of this? It is the gift of the Holy Spirit, the life-force that darts and flows among all the people of this world to give and sustain life.

The celebration of Pentecost tells us what lies on the other side of COVID-19 and on the other side of all our trials: life with God. This message is necessary not because we are stumbling past Pentecost as a scattered and beleaguered people of God. It is necessary because the truth of the gospel shines most brightly in challenging times. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5).

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