23 May 2021 Saint Athanasius Lutheran Church
The Feast of Pentecost Vienna, VA

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"The Impossible, Improbable Work of the Spirit"
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26–16:15

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

You want me to do *what*? Seriously? What's the point? I mean, really, what's the point? They're dead. They're dried up. Very dry. They're bones, for cryin' out loud! You want me to preach to bones. Bones that have no ears, no hearts, no minds. Bones. You want me to preach to bones. Lord, Ezekiel must have thought, you've asked me to do a lot of weird and unusual things in my prophetic career, but this! This takes the cake! But it is not for prophets to question, but to do as they are commanded. So Ezekiel preaches . . . to a congregation of dry bones.

But at least bones won't hurt you or strike back at you. They may not listen; but bones just lie there. But for Peter and the other apostles, *their* congregation *was* dangerous. The Jews in Jerusalem, *just 50-some days ago*, had turned their frustration and anger against Jesus, yelling out to Pilate "crucify Him! crucify Him!" Jesus had been an enigma. The healings and miracles were cool and all, but He ran with the wrong crowd, and when He had the audacity to turn His preaching against *them*, good Jews, children of Abraham, He had to go. Some of them had hoped He was the promised Messiah, but He sure didn't act like one. He spoke against them as much as against the Romans! With Messiahs like that, who needs enemies?

So now, to *this* crowd, Peter and the others will preach . . . their *first* sermon. Tough crowd! They probably envied Ezekiel. Those dry bones were more likely to listen than these folks! If they didn't listen to Jesus, why would they listen to them? And maybe they would turn their frustration and anger against them now. After all, that's what Jesus had said. That ***they will put you out of the synagogues***. And that ***the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God***. Maybe that hour had come. But it is not for apostles to question, but to do as they are commanded. And Jesus had commanded them *to make disciples of all nations, beginning at Jerusalem* (Acts 1:8). So here, in the very place where just weeks ago Jesus was crucified, they would preach this same Jesus into the ears of those who didn't want Him around and wanted nothing to do with Him. God is gracious. Preaching to these people who surely didn't deserve it.

And Peter uses the prophet Joel as his text, to explain to them what was now happening. That remarkably, God was ***pouring out His Spirit on all flesh***. Years ago, it was Moses

who had wished for that very thing. While Israel was in the wilderness, God had taken some of the Spirit He had given to Moses and put it on 70 of the elders of the people. To help him. Another unlikely congregation, for all the people of Israel did in the wilderness - pretty much from day one! - was grumble, complain, rebel, and wish they were back in Egypt. But when Joshua raised some concerns, Moses said, *"Oh that God would pour out His Spirit on all the people!"* (Numbers 11:29) And now it was happening. God was taking not just a *part* of the Spirit that had been given to Jesus, but the *fullness* of the Spirit and now pouring it out. And on *all* flesh. Not just Jews by birth, this was a promise for *all* the nations - ***Parthians and Medes and Elamites and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabians. . . . That everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved.***

And so the Old Testament festival of Pentecost was being fulfilled. Pentecost, the beginning of the harvest; and now God was beginning His harvest of souls. And where better to begin than in the shadow of the cross. The cross that made it all possible.

So Peter and the others would preach - just as Ezekiel had, just as Moses had. And the Spirit would work through that Word. The Spirit that *actually made* those dry bones live and come to life. The Spirit that worked through Moses and gave life to Israel in the wilderness. The Spirit that would now work in the hearts of the nations that day in Jerusalem. *Don't underestimate the Spirit of God!* The Spirit of God that created all things in the beginning *ex nihilo* - out of nothing, can certainly give life to dry bones and to those dried up and dead in their trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2). Including the most unlikely and sinful people of all . . . **YOU!**

Oh, you didn't see that coming? Too busy patting yourselves on the back? Thinking like the Pharisee in the Temple one day: *Thank God I am not like that! Like that man, a sinner!* (Luke 18:11) Oh but you are. Chasing after the pleasures and cares and desires of this world has dried you out and robbed you of the life God has for you. And have you not grumbled, complained, and rebelled against God as much as Israel in the wilderness? And you're not even in the wilderness but abundantly blessed! And still you want more, better, different, higher. And those folks in Jerusalem that day? *They* killed Jesus! But do you not crucify Jesus anew when you continue in your sins and live as if God did not matter and as if you mattered most?

And so to you, too, God preaches and sends preachers. Because whoever you are and whatever you've done, however dried up and rebellious you are, your Father loves you, Jesus died for you, and the Spirit is working in you. God wants you as His child. **Which is pretty remarkable**. A love and grace far beyond anything in this world and life.

So through His Word God continues His work, which Jesus described in the words we heard from John this morning. Teaching that when ***the Spirit of truth comes . . . He will***

convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged. . . . He [the Spirit] ***will guide you into all the truth***.

That is, the Spirit will **first** teach you the truth about yourself and your sin; the sin that blossoms from not believing in the goodness and loving kindness of your Father and so taking matters into your own hands. Doing what <u>you</u> want, believing what <u>you</u> think, exalting yourself and relying on yourself. You need first to know that hard truth about yourself.

Then after teaching you the truth about the righteousness you lack, the Spirit then points you to the righteousness that Jesus <u>*is*</u> and <u>*has*</u> and <u>*gives*</u> to you. The righteousness He has perfectly fulfilled for you and all people. Righteousness shown and proved in His resurrection and ascension - that the sinless one bore the sins of all the world, atoned for them, and defeated death and hell in His resurrection.

And then the Spirit will teach you that the ruler of this world is judged. He who accuses you is himself accused and judged and his fate is sealed. His actions lead not where you want to be, his words all lies. He has not your best interests in mind - only his own. What a contrast to Jesus! Who *always* has <u>your</u> best interests in mind, even when that meant going to the cross. So do not listen to and follow the one who <u>is</u> judged, but the one who is coming again <u>as</u> Judge.

That is the truth the Spirit teaches through the preaching of the Word, the preaching of the Church. The Word that is able to bring dry, dead bones to life, that is able to crush hard and stoney hearts, and that is able to turn crucifiers into confessors, *kindling a fire of love in our hearts* (Introit). **Which is pretty remarkable**.

So what a day of hope is Pentecost! This Old Testament harvest festival that pointed forward to this New Testament day of Pentecost and the beginning of the Spirit's harvest of souls. Continuing down through the ages - the time of the apostles, the early church, the persecutions, the middle ages, the dark ages, the renaissance, the enlightment, and down to our day and age today. The Church and Christians have been attacked and assaulted time and time again, and yet the preaching continues, the work of the Spirit continues. In unlikely places, to unlikely people, and with amazing results. The <u>visible</u> Church on earth waxing and waning, growing in one place and shrinking in another, but the Kingdom of God always growing. One Baptism, one Absolution, one Supper at a time. The Spirit being poured out on <u>*all*</u> flesh, but <u>*each one*</u> important, precious, and valuable to Him.

As you are. That's why the Spirit has brought you here. That's why the Spirit came to you in Baptism. That's why the preaching here continues and the Body and Blood of

Jesus continues to be placed into your mouth. Because you matter to your Father in heaven. He wants not one soul to be lost. So He is here for you and will not stop. That you be His own and live under Him in His kingdom.

In His kingdom not just one day in the future, but already here and now. For His kingdom is already here and now. So He has gifts here for you and has prepared good works for you to do. He has forgiveness here for you, that you live not a life of guilt and shame, but of joy and confidence. And with His Body and Blood, He feeds you with His own life, that you have the strength to live in this world of sin, death, and opposition to His Word and ways. In all these ways the Spirit coming to you, working in you and keeping you in Christ.

Dried up you, dried up no more. Hard-hearted you, hard-hearted no more. Sinner you, now son of God! **Which is pretty remarkable**.

And then think . . . who do <u>you</u> know who is all dried up and dead? Who do you know who thinks Jesus not a Messiah or Saviour worth following? Who do you know for whom the Word of God . . . well, just isn't going to do any good? Useless, like preaching to dry bones! Or dangerous, like preaching to those who kill and crucify Christians? *Don't underestimate the Spirit of God!* For those dry bones came to life. Many who shouted "crucify!" repented and were baptized. And today, you are here. Raised by the Spirit from being dead in your trespasses and sins to a new life in Christ. The Spirit is continuing the harvest. Pentecost is still ongoing.

So be bold, dear Christians! And when you're tempted to say with Ezekiel, Lord, you want me to do *what*? . . . You want me to give *what*? You want me to do good to *who*? You want me to forgive *who*? You want me to follow you *where*? Just do it. *Don't underestimate the Spirit of God!* Our remarkable God who specializes in doing the impossible and the improbable.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.