

Sermon: On the Verge of Comprehension

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, May 23, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

“Mortal, can these bones live?” A curious question posed by God to Prophet Ezekiel, in the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones. A question that hardly seems fair. In that vision, the prophet was brought there by the Spirit of the Lord, and set down in the middle of a valley full of bones, they were very many and they were very dry, indicating those bodies had been long dead.

Humanity is conditioned by our mortality, and death has been our most constant and unrelenting neighbour. Be it at the concentration camps of Dachau and Auschwitz during WWII, or the rice paddies of Viet Nam after being carpeted by napalm, or the more recent neighbourhood of Gaza, “collaterally” toppled by the Israeli army, or even hospital compounds in and around COVID ravaged India. Mass graves, as witnessed by Ezekiel, are regrettably no stranger to us. Return from the land of the dead, for those who had been long dead, simply do not happen.

Can these bones live? Of course not! That would certainly be my response, if I was ever asked by God. As incomprehensible as that question was, the prophet replied with an equally curious response: “*O Lord God, you know.*” Without ever putting himself in the position to play God, or to even venture to guess what God is capable of doing, Ezekiel deferred to God: You know, O Lord God, and only you could know if these damn bones can or should live.

Let us turn our attention to a different question “*What does this mean?*”, question posed by Jews from every nation, pilgrims who had gathered in Jerusalem during Pentecost, and had witnessed the disciples of Jesus preaching in multitude of tongues or languages the Good News of Christ. Here, I am jumping a bit between the two Scripture texts this morning, as they are thematically connected. “*What does this mean?*”, asked the Jews, amazed and perplexed as they look on to each other.

Pentecost is one of three major festivals of Judaism. It takes place fifty days after Passover. The Israelites traditionally celebrated Pentecost to commemorate the receiving of the Torah from Moses, on the foothill of Mont Sinai. It happens to correspond also to the first harvest, so plenty of first fruits would be brought in, fine grapes making new wine—let the good time roll.

After the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus, the disciples were instructed to wait in Jerusalem, to wait for the power on high, and they didn’t wait

long. On the day of Pentecost, as they were all gathered in one place, came a sound of what appeared to be the rush of a violent wind. Holy Spirit came down like fire in divided tongues, rested on each of them. All of them began to speak in tongues, in languages they would have no way of knowing, yet there they were, telling all passerby of the Good News of Jesus Christ—indeed he lives, raised from the dead by the Almighty God. To the gathered Jews, looking at the chaotic scene before them, “they had too much new wine!”, some scoffed, yet many others, were right on the verge of comprehension.

The vision of Ezekiel does not require much of guessing work, to interpret what it means, because God did the work for us later in verse 11 when God said to the prophet, “*“Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’”*

At that time, the people of God were in exile. The temple of God was destroyed by the invading Babylonia army. The city of Jerusalem laid in ruin, most its inhabitants were killed or scattered. A select few, the remnants were spared, carried off to Babylon to serve a new lord, to worship a new god. In such a context, the community of faith had mostly lost its faith, and to be honest, there was not much a community left. Into such a context, Ezekiel was told to prophesy, “*Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.*”

Gruesome imagery aside, the command to prophesy to dry bones, from a purely human point of view, is completely irrational, illogical, and futile. Yet, Ezekiel obediently complied. He did what he was told, and out of that simple obedience, God did the impossible. However the job was not done, the raised multitude had bones, sinews, flesh and skin, but no breath—the community had the requisite form but no substance, bodies but no spirit. So God issued a second command to Ezekiel, “*Prophesy 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.*”

‘Breath’ or ruah in the Hebrew language also means ‘spirit’. God was essentially asking the prophet to command the Spirit of God from four corners of the world, so to give life to those breathless multitude. From purely a Spiritual point of view, once again this command was beyond comprehension. Yet, once again, Ezekiel obeyed, did what was asked of him. Through such a radical obedience, God then accomplished both the impossible and the incomprehensible.

In 2013, I had a similar Ezekiel moment. The congregation where I formerly served in Montreal was in the early stage of being rebuilt, after undergoing a painful period of conflict and division. Joshua and Esther, a couple who had rejoined the congregation and took part in the rebuilding, came to me with an idea—a weeknight children program to teach bible stories in English to new immigrants from China. The idea made sense to me, intuitively. Many of those newcomers were denied the opportunity to learn English in school under Quebec’s language law. Most of them would not have encountered the Gospel before. So we committed that idea to prayer, studied it at session, visited other congregations who had in similar ministries, and conducted a congregational survey to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

Months went by, and I was still not certain if we should go ahead with that idea. The congregation was still at a too weakened state to commit precious financial resource and human capital to an unproven ministry. There were real cultural barriers for a Taiwanese congregation to embrace newcomers from China. The leadership core was certainly not unanimous in that vision. So there I was, deferring to God, O Lord, you know. Truth be told, I knew it was a good vision, the right step for the congregation to take, but I was afraid to take that plunge—it was paralysis by too much analysis.

So after another church renewal conference that I had urged the leadership core to attend, and as we were debriefing in a coffee shop, Joshua and Esther came to me again. They put me on the spot, (well Esther certainly did) wanting me to make a decision right there and then, not passing it back to the session like a hot potato. It was, as if the Lord God had commanded me, “Prophecy to the bones, mortal, prophesy!” So between sips of coffee and mouth full of spicy fries, I replied, “Ok, let’s go for it!”

We set in motion that day, what would become the Pioneer Club at TRC, a weekly Friday night children program of praise, worship, bible stories, games and snacks for those between six to twelve year-old. Twenty four kids signed up during the first year. We soon had to create another program to evangelize the parents, and added a different one for teenagers. When we realized that we were running out of coworkers, we called out to neighbouring congregations for help. Many qualified Sunday school teachers came, from different backgrounds and denominations. A true ecumenical ministry.

The program grew steadily, year after year until there was literally no more room to house it. We had to actually turn down some parents. At the height of that outreach to the community, 30 or more coworkers were spiritually feeding 60 kids with another 30 parents, and we did this weekly. Many of those families eventually joined the congregation, baptized into the Christian faith. Not quite a vast multitude, but certainly the work of God through the Spirit of God.

What does this mean, for St Giles? Well, noting and everything. As the Church universal celebrates Pentecost today, the beginning of the Church, many clergies across Canada are preaching literally to empty pews due to COVID lockdown. Out of necessity, congregations are adopting to online platforms to keep their communities connected, to continue preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, some more successful than others.

As I look across the empty pews of St Giles, it affects me, impacts me in many unspoken ways. I know you are out there. Some I could see when we Pass the Peace on Zoom. Some I could hear joining the teleconference. Some I could only count as mere number of viewers on Youtube, unique or not. Faithfulness takes on a very different form in the midst of a global pandemic. I must say thank you to the production team, to those who continue to walk with me Sunday after Sunday. Your presence is God-sent. I must say thank you to Pat, the church administrator, who has kept company with me during the weekdays. You are essential, not only to the congregation but to my mental well-being.

Yet I want more, and I am praying for more here at St Giles. I see packed pews, overflowing to the second floor balcony. I see full choir singing new songs to God with hearts full of praise. I see young people participating in worship all fired up with a Pentecostal passion and creativity. I see little children running around the sanctuary with no one shushing them as they are precious before the Lord. I see multicultural, multilingual and intergenerational families here at St Giles, all walking together in Christian faith. I see a community of faith that embraces God's mission, to bless the wider community through social actions, through commitment to justice, and through care of the environment.

No, I assure you I am not drunk. No new nor old wine flow through my veins this morning. But, how do we get there, you ask? I honestly don't know, I am still on the verge of comprehension. What I do know is that God will reveal His plan for us, in God's time

On that particular day of Pentecost, some two thousands plus years ago, Peter stood up amongst the bewildered crowd. The Spirit of the Lord was on him, as he preached a passionate sermon, spoke about visions and dreams, testified to the people of the resurrected Christ, urged them to repent before God, some three thousand of them did and were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Praise be to the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.