

Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

Ruach!!!©
Pentecost 2012

Dr. Sharlyn Gates

Dr. Janet Hunt, a Lutheran pastor in Northern Illinois, writes on her website, dancingwiththeword.com about a story she heard on NPR.

"Aseel Albanna ... came to the United States for a four week visit from Iraq twenty years ago. When war broke out and it was unsafe for her to return, through family she found a way to stay on as a student. So it was that she was 'away from home' during those tragic years when her country was destroyed by war. She had reason to return not long ago though, and as she was driven through the streets of Baghdad she was heard to exclaim over and over again at how much it had all changed. When she finally got out of the car and stood in front of the house which had once been her home, she said,

*"It's like there's no more life left in it. What I have left is only memories, because right
now
I barely recognize it, to be honest. The only thing that's still here is the breeze,
that Baghdad breeze."*

"Only the wind remains.... "I thought of Pentecost when first I heard this story. Of the power of the wind," writes Janet Hunt. "About how, like with the Spirit, we can destroy all this world holds, but we cannot take away the wondrous power of God. The breeze remains, perhaps sometimes in spite of us."

Dr. Hunt's sermon stood out at me in a powerful way as I had been thinking all week about how we can so easily get ourselves to the point of feeling and looking like the dry bones in Ezekiel's vision, yet the "ruach" ... the breath of God ... continues to breathe new life into all that seems dead.

We must remember that ... when everything seems to have lost its zest ... the *ruach* remains. The power of the Holy Spirit never blows out.

There is something in that Hebrew word, isn't there, that has life in it? I've always loved the Hebrew word for breath or wind or spirit ... it is the same word for all those English words ... *ruach*!!!!

Genesis 1 says "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was^a formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the ruach ... the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ¹

^a Or possibly *became*

¹ *The Holy Bible: New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984, S. Ge 1:1-2

In Ezekiel, the prophet hears God say "Come from the four winds, O breath, ruach, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."

It is the Spirit of God ... the breath of God ... that blows new life into everything it touches. And in the case of our story in Acts today, it touched the apostles, it breathed new life into them and just about knocked the socks off of everything in the whole place.

They were waiting expectantly, just as Jesus told them to do, but what happened was so much more than what they expected. At least I imagine it was. Jesus said, "you will receive power from on high and you will be my witnesses in Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth."

But who could have known that this power would come like the sound of a mighty, rushing wind! Or, looking and feeling like tongues of fire shooting down on top of their heads! Or, who would have believed that these common, uneducated men whom Jesus had picked up from the banks of the lake as they were about to go out to do their days fishing job – that they would begin preaching about Jesus' death and resurrection and salvation with a power that could only be from God – and not only with power, but in different languages that everyone there for this great Jewish feast would understand?

Who would have ever expected that the birth of Christ's Church would be so wide spread that the "ends of the earth" would reach all the way to a little town called Holly, Michigan – and every one of them Gentiles, not Jews!

And if you know any church history at all, you know that there were times when people tried their best to kill the Church. You know that Christians have been persecuted, and killed, that it's been against the law to own a bible, to speak the name of Christ. You know that Churches were taken over in countries and it was forbidden to worship God.

When I was in Lithuania, I visited a place called the "Hill of crosses." The city of Siauliai was founded in 1236 and it was then that crosses began being placed as a defiance against foreign invaders and as a statement of their Catholic faith.

During World War II, Lithuania was captured by Germany and then was taken over by Soviet Russia at the end of the war. *"From 1944 until Lithuania's independence in 1991, Siauliai (Shoolay) was a part of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic of the USSR. During the years of Soviet rule – from 1944 - 1991, the pilgrimage to the Hill of Crosses served as a vital expression of Lithuanian nationalism. The Soviets repeatedly removed Christian crosses placed on the hill by Lithuanians. Three times, during 1961, 1973 and 1975, the hill was leveled, the crosses were burned or turned into scrap metal, and the area was covered with waste and sewage. Following each of these desecrations local inhabitants and pilgrims from all over Lithuania rapidly replaced crosses upon the sacred hill. In 1985, the Hill of Crosses was finally left in peace. The reputation of the sacred hill has since spread all over the world and every year it is visited by many thousands of*

*pilgrims, including Pope John Paul II*² – and my group, who erected a cross there ourselves.

Humans can destroy everything around us – but the *ruach* – the wind of the Spirit remains and the power cannot be snuffed out!

I believe that Pentecost Sunday is a wonderful time for us to be reminded that God's Holy Spirit still exists in a powerful way. We in the mainline churches sigh and lament over the decline in numbers of our churches and we feel, at times, like the breath has been knocked out of us by the mega churches and all that they are able to do with many resources and lots of people.

The power of the Holy Spirit cannot and has not been snuffed out. The winds of the spirit remain no matter how things look. Some would say the smaller, mainline churches look like Ezekiel's dry bones and I strongly disagree with that.

There are definite signs of life in the Presbyterian Church! Elders continue to be called and ordained to serve in ministry. Lay people continue to give their time and talents to the mission of the church. Young people are being confirmed with a conviction in the faith that is sure and deep. Ministers are still being called to seminary and to pastor churches.

People are going to the ends of the earth for the gospel's sake, taking the love and good news of Christ to others in many ways.

Locally, the Baby Pantry is serving 26 families in the Holly area and people are bringing food to take to the food pantry at the Baptist Church. Ministers are meeting together from different denominations to work and pray and support one another and the churches efforts.

Christ is alive and the Holy Spirit continues to empower us in ministry. The *ruach* continues to blow!

But ... and I do think there is always more ... we must not be stuck in the security of our comfortable ways. Yes, the Holy Spirit is here and we are doing the work of the church.

But ... are we waiting and hoping and open to the *ruach* blowing in and making things new and more alive than ever before? Are we willing to let the Holy Spirit take us over and really empower us – set the church on fire?

Do we want the Holy Spirit to truly revive us and control us – or do we want to control the Spirit? Isn't it scary to think that it might be possible for amazing things to happen

² http://sacredsites.com/europe/lithuania/hill_of_crosses.html

right here in our midst? Things that are different? Things that knock our socks off? Music that is passionate worship? Inhibitions set aside and real praise and joy expressed in a way we've never done before?

Visions for ministry coming to life among us; Ways of meeting people where they are and welcoming them in ways that are irresistible becoming our great passion.

What if we were burning with desire to show Christ's love for one another and for those who are hurting and in need of hearing about the one who gave his all for us? What if we were changed? Changed?

What if the Church were on fire with the Holy Spirit? How would that look in Holly Presbyterian Church? Would it look like God wants it to look? Would we allow that to happen, I wonder?

With the Holy Spirit – anything could happen. And it probably will!

© Copyright 2012. All Rights Reserved.