

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Pentecost Sunday
June 4, 2006

Reflection: "A time is envisioned when the world was not, only a watery chaos (the dark, "indistinguishable sea") and a warm cosmic breath, which could give an impetus of life." From the Rig Veda

Readings: Ezekiel 37: 1 – 14
Acts 2: 1 – 21

Hymns:	Hymn #127	<i>On Pentecost They Gathered</i>
	Anthem	<i>Hearken! Stay Close to Jesus Christ</i>
		-David Moritz Michael
	Hymn #514	<i>Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ</i>
	Hymn #535	<i>Go With Us Lord</i>

Ruah Elohim! The Creative Spirit of God!

A Reflection

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I towered over Dr. Barbara Austin Lucas. The Dean of Admissions at New York Theological Seminary, she was the first person I met when I decided to apply to school.

She was also my (First) Old Testament professor and from a culture very different from my own. Barabara became one of my favorite if not one of my most challenging professors at NYTS. She always managed to "touch me," especially when shortly after 9/11, she walked our evening class from 29th and Fifth over to Bellevue to stand with – be present – among the people milling about, looking on the Wall of Prayer for loved ones that had been missing since the attack. I walked the distance from school to hospital with her that night, the rest of the class spread out as we made our way. I don't remember what we said, but I can still feel her presence.

She was connected to a lot of "firsts" for me. As a requirement for one of our classes, she had us descend upon Penn Station at rush hour with Bible tracts in our hands, speaking the Good News to folks coming and going.

It was quite an experience, and since that time I have tried to never “brush” anyone away – knowing now just how dismissive and diminishing such an act can feel.

She was also the first “in person” fire and brimstone preacher I had ever heard preach. It was on the text Ivan read for us this morning - Ezekiel’s *Vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones*. Let me tell you, when she started to preach, it was as if she gained height and power with ever syllable of each and every word. She didn’t read her sermon, she spread it over the room, pacing back and forth on the dais, punching openings into the air with her fists followed by her arms, and what seemed like her entire body - her voice shrill, then soft, then firm, then exhorting – engaging all the way! I can still hear her:

God told Ezekiel: “Prophesy upon these dry bones, and say unto them, ‘O ye Dry Bones hear the Word of the Lord.’”

“So I prophesied as I was commanded: and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together, bone to bone, and sinews and flesh upon them, and skin and they stood up! They stood up! Will you stand up? Will you take your dry old bones, dry from not hearing the word of God, from resisting God’s will – will you stand up on those bones and let the breath of God breathe again in your heart and soul and your actions. Get up! Breathe!”

Dr. Austin-Lucas’ sermon was as much, probably more, about the way the she allowed the Spirit lifted her that morning of our annual retreat – than any words she said. By the time she was done, I was fired-up, ready to go preach and serve God and my sisters and brothers, New York State, USA, the planet, beam me aboard Scotty to a place where no preacher had gone before!

I didn’t understand everything she said or how she said it – but it got through to me – and I wasn’t the only one. The whole place was abuzz.

She brought to life in our hearts and minds Scripture from thousands of years ago, the Promise God gave to the Hebrews that they would survive and recover from captivity and the terrible battles and losses they had experienced. Their bones were strong and still held the soul, as ancients believed. She made us feel as though we were there – bones and soul strong, knowing God and our mission.

I think had Barbara preached on the Acts verses this morning, it would have not been much different. Glossalalia – speaking in tongues - was a common practice of the times. Ecstatic, unintelligible outbursts of religious and spiritual experiences – such things were part of the fabric in first century Palestine as they are today in some worship and religious experiences. But for the disciples of Jesus, it was different. This was not some “ordinary” event.

Fifty days had passed since the execution of Jesus. The cross had been an obstacle to faith for these followers. How could Jesus have died like this? He was the Son of God! What happened? To him? To the kingdom? What will happen to us?

Not only did the torture and death of Jesus rock the disciples’ faith, it also minimized the impact of the Nazaorean who spoke of radical obedience to God and dispensing of radical love to his sisters and brothers. At least for a time...

But something was happening...

Time passed, we have read of some of the experiences of the Apostles following Jesus’ death. They were growing in Spirit and strength in ways they probably never understood – just knew.

Finally, they are in this place. In a gathering of the diverse multitude of the times. Suddenly, they become enraptured with the Spirit and power of God.

Fear? What fear? No longer were they afraid, as when they left the women at the foot of the cross; no longer were they huddled in an upper room, scared of the wrath of those who had executed Jesus, no... they were speaking out without fear, saying what they needed to say without regard for their own personal safety.

They were on fire with the Spirit, and not only on fire, they had discovered the power of the Spirit within them and among them and it had to come out, be heard, and carried to the nations of all the world – no matter the cost or danger or risk.

This birthday of the church was a day in which the Good News transcended all language barriers. Listeners were amazed, as they were absorbed into the name and presence and power of Jesus through these disciples.

Luke's rendition of Peter's speech, the first of Christian apologies, confirmed the prophecy of Joel from long ago – and for Jews, the satisfaction of prophecy was enough to make it true. There should be no mistake, whatever this event was, however it may have actually transpired – it was a powerful new direction in this church and the lives of the followers of Jesus.

All of us have felt a surge of spirit from time to time, the rush of the walk off run at a ballgame. Doesn't matter the language of the fans, does it?!

Or the response to a symphony or other performance, the teaching moments in a classroom, the Presence of God here in our hearts that sometimes just stops us, makes us quiet and awed.

Ruach Elohim! The creative breath of the Spirit! From before Ezekiel until long after today.

God creates in each of us. That's what God does, God creates

awe, silence, outbursts of energy, courage, compassion, generosity, hospitality, fervor, and faith. God crosses all boundaries, for the Spirit has no boundaries – it is working on us, all the time.

On this Pentecost Sunday just relax and let in the power of the Spirit that is in and upon us. It's not the words, it's the presence of the Word within us and other – a presence from long before we knew how to speak and one that will be with us long after our voices are gone. Breathe! Ruah! and know the peace and courage of the Spirit within you, this day and always. Amen.