

Live!

Pentecost makes me choose between Peter and Ezekiel. That's just not fair. Two of the dudes in the Bible that I love the most, and they're experiences of the Spirit of God get smushed into one day? I named my dog Ezekiel, and I can barely preach a sermon without talking about Peter at some point or another. But I guess Ezekiel wins this year, mostly, but I'm still going to try to at least give Peter a mention. The thing that really grabs me about Zeke this: his world had fallen apart, he had been one of the chosen people, and on top of that a high priest of the Zadokite order. He served the Lord in the Temple and thus had the esteem and honor of such a position. Then, the Babylonians came, the temple was destroyed and Ezekiel was carried off into exile along with most anybody else who the Babylonians thought might prove a useful slave or a good trophy.

Psalm 137 echoes the plight of Ezekiel and the people of Israel: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept when we remembered Zion." That's all they could do, weep, they couldn't even sing their songs in that foreign land because it just hurt too much. And yet, here is Ezekiel, a priest without a temple, one of a people who had been chosen by God, but who now seemed utterly abandoned, and Ezekiel has these visions, weird visions, frightening visions. He sees The Lord enthroned in heaven, he sees the temple rebuilt and most famously of all he sees a valley of dry bones, and he is asked to answer a question, "Can these bones live?"

He can't answer that question straight. He trusts God, he really does, after all he is in the presence of the Spirit of God, he has been brought into this vision by the *yad-adonai*, the Hand of the Lord, and the *ruah Yahweh*, The Spirit of the Lord, or more literally, the breath of God. This breath of God thing was pretty serious business, it was what hovered over the face of the deep in Genesis one, it was what existed in the beginning, it was what spoke, let there be light, it is what breathed into us and gave us life. It was nothing to be trifled with, it could grab a man and take him places, it could turn cities into ash, it could do that face melting thing that happens at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* before it even has its morning coffee. But his world... everything he knew and trusted... it's all gone. The bones are so very dry, and he only has a marginal faith that even the very breath of being can bring them back.

Let's back up a few steps here and talk about what was going on before the exile. The people of Israel, the good old chosen ones, well they weren't acting very chosen. They weren't looking much like the blessing to the nations that God promised Abraham he would become. They were more or less a second rate kingdom in a particularly important little stretch of land. They were all too ready to give up their distinctive faith in One God, pretty much every time some Baal or Asherah cult came around and offered people the chance to get all the benefits of god without any of the messy relationship stuff. They had played right into this trap too, because the Priests, even the Priests like Ezekiel, had locked their One God up tight inside the Holy of Holies, even though God told them over and over he didn't want to live in there, and tried to show them that they didn't need to do that, they tried to keep God in a box, because it just seemed like the right thing to do, you know, give him a throne and a special place all decorated up with gold and jewels. Except the One God refused to stay in there in the dark, and so they ended up essentially worshipping idols and calling it god, they were, for all practical purposes, no better than the pagans, they just had better scriptures. The priests assured the regular folk that they really didn't have to worry about God being on their side because: look here, we've got all the right clothes and all the right words and we make all the right sacrifices, and we tell you exactly what to do to keep

on this Yahweh's good side. They took God right out of people's hands and kept him safe where only the people who knew what was what could get at him.

Wait, does this sound familiar? I think it does a bit, I think it sounds a lot like what happened with the Roman Catholic Church leading up to the reformation, and I think it sounds a lot like some of the various forms of fundamentalism that are passing as Christianity today in this country. Maybe it's a fundamental human sin to want to control God, in fact, yeah it really is. We would rather have a God that is dead and safe than a God that lives and breathes and takes us places we don't want to go. It's no wonder God tore that nonsense down.

You know, sometimes I lament the fact that I have been called into ministry in this postmodern age, where people like to "spiritual but not religious." That's the postmodern version of idolatry by the way: putting your faith in something that you basically invent for yourself. And while it seems like it might be kind of new, it's actually really old, Paul called it "itching ears," when people just wanted someone to tell them what they wanted to hear. It's why prophets so often ended up in trouble, it's why con men and charlatans can run some pretty successful "churches." Any illusion that this sort of phenomenon is new is just that, an illusion. My own personal version of this illusion is something like this: I would have liked to see what it was like to be a Presbyterian Minister in the age of Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry Emerson Fosdick, where I could really use all of the stuff I learned about Ezekiel and the dry bones in my Hebrew Exegesis paper. I would like to lead the church in an era where we are the center of the culture, where our influence was enormous and our clout almost knew no bounds.

Then I remember, that Ezekiel and Peter didn't get that either. Ezekiel had visions that made people think he had chewed some kind of hallucinogenic weed and Peter had to assure people that he and the other Apostles were not drunk. Ezekiel's visions and the story of Pentecost both tell us that the Spirit of God the *ruah Yahweh* cannot be contained or managed, and woe to those who do. We are supposed to prophesy to the breath, call to the breath, let the fire burn over our heads and the words pass from our mouths. It's a terrible thing we have done, to try and make this safe and neat and controllable, that is our sin and that is why we are in exile. That's why our fancy temples have been torn down and turned into coffee shops, because that's not where God wanted to live. God is free to go anywhere with us, even into Babylon. Our continued and futile attempts to keep the breath of being on some kind of leash are the height of silliness.

Because of our silliness, we have done a great disservice to all those "spiritual but not religious" types out there, by letting them think that being spiritual is something they can manage on their own. Jesus trained his disciples for years, and they went through the darkness of the crucifixion of their teacher, before the Spirit of God came upon them on Pentecost. Ezekiel had been trained as a high priest and then also had to endure the trial of losing everything so that he could see these visions and relate them faithfully. More to the point, these men who were trained and prepared were still brought to the edge of their own faith by the *ruah Yahweh*. Most people who encounter the Spirit of God, without preparation are not in any way able to deal with it, think Moses at the burning bush and the Israelites at the foot of mount Horeb. If we believe that the Spirit of God is loose in the world, we should be doing more to help people be prepared for that presence, or this could get messy.

That's why we need to welcome people into communion, not just so they can become good little Church members, but so that they can enter into the process of discipleship, which requires other people to really accomplish. The journey of faith is constantly being moved by the breath of God, it is an active and

living process that no one gets right all on their own. Both Ezekiel and the Acts story of Pentecost remind us that from time to time we are going to get swept up in the Spirit of God, and then things will begin to really live!