

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Pentecost 2021 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

Last Sunday we were sort of in between Jesus and the Holy Spirit, because Jesus had ascended but the Spirit had not yet descended. But today, Pentecost, we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming down like the rush of a violent wind, giving the disciples the ability to speak in other languages. Sometimes Pentecost is described as the church being born.

All of the readings today somehow relate to the Spirit. The Old Testament reading describes *ruach* entering the bones in the valley of dry bones. The Lord tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the bones and say "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

*Ruach* can be translated as wind, spirit, or breath. I prefer the image of breath today, because it adds a dimension to the Holy Spirit particularly appropriate to me personally as well as to all of us. Breath has taken on extra significance to me since my lung cancer diagnosis just over a year ago. Last year, Pentecost Sunday was the first Sunday I was back in front of the camera following my open thoracic surgeries as well as the last Sunday before I left for four months of disability while undergoing chemo. I was excited to be back at church for a big event, but sad because we weren't meeting in person on an important feast day.

Breath is also a great translation of *ruach* for us right now because this disease that has wreaked havoc on all aspects of our lives is spread through respiratory droplets. Through our breath. Some of our views about breath may be forever changed. After seeing graphics about droplets spreading, I suspect I will be less comfortable in close proximity to others for a long time.

When Hector and Cathy put chairs back in here on Wednesday, they showed me that how the stick that we had previously used to keep rows a uniform distance apart suddenly seemed too close, so even the rows that are not physically distanced are now further apart than they used to be. We've spent time staying spread out, and it's going to take a while to become comfortable being closer together. I just went to the grocery store in person for the first time three weeks ago. I can't imagine going already with my mask off.

We who have been vaccinated have a lot of adjusting to do, and others are not yet able to be vaccinated or may not plan to get vaccinated or be able to. For now, at the recommendation of my oncologist, I'm keeping my mask on. I don't think about this as protecting myself as much as protecting those who aren't vaccinated yet.

I don't think I've chosen the dry bones passage as a sermon text on Pentecost before this year, but it spoke to me in 2021 not only because of "breath" but because of place. We don't read a lot from the book of Ezekiel in church. Ezekiel is set during the exile. This valley of bones, then, is in Babylon, where the Israelites are exiled. Ideally, such bones would have been interred with other bones from one's family, rather than scattered around some valley in a foreign land, exposed in the sun. So the valley isn't desolate only because of the skeletons, but because of the place.

Place matters.

During this pandemic, we've often been told, at least in relation to church, that place didn't matter because church is wherever we are. This is true to an extent. We need to conceptualize church beyond these walls.

But church is also within these walls.

Place matters. What places matter to you?

Arizona matters to me. The succulents and the red dirt. Roadrunners and cactus wrens and little gray birds called verdin that, when you see them up close or through binoculars shock you with their surprising yellow faces. Arizona is the land of my ancestors, and I miss it.

But I have also come to love Virginia after twenty-five years here: the green. The daffodils, phlox, azaleas. Iris, peonies, hydrangeas. The magnolia blossoms. I love when the ruby-throated hummingbirds come back in April and how after they leave in the fall, yellow-throated sparrows and juncos come for the winter.

These places matter to me. They are in my bones, the way Israel was in the dry bones in that valley in Babylon, where God blew breath back in.

This church, St. David's, this building, these grounds: they matter to me. To us. I have a finger labyrinth at home that was a present from you all when I came back from chemo. I love its Santa Rosa design. When I trace it with my finger I think of our Santa Rose labyrinth here in the prayer garden that we built. That has our prayers buried under bricks.

But place matters, because as much as I love that finger labyrinth, it's not the same as walking the labyrinth here. Praying along with the livestream isn't the same as praying here, in a room with other imperfect, beloved disciples, brothers and sisters. But, I love that I can take the livestream with me to Arizona or Kentucky and be connected with all of you as we worship.

Place matters.

Today we celebrate the Holy Spirit coming down. God breathing life into bones. The disciples overcome by the Spirit sharing the good news in languages they had never learned. All of those cultures came together in that place and then carried the message to other places.

On Pentecost, during a pandemic where we have become afraid of breath, we remember that breath brings life, that God breathes into us.

On Pentecost, we remember that place matters for church, and that the church can be every place.