

“Repairing the World”  
May 23, 2021, Pentecost Sunday  
Scripture: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21

Ezekiel began his career as a prophet about five years after the Israelites had been forced into exile in Babylon. When he emerged on the scene Israel was broken. Literally, the city of Jerusalem was devastated and the temple left a pile of rubble. But as a people Israel was completely demoralized. The best evidence in the Bible of that is Psalm 137. It’s the one that starts, “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion.” It’s a psalm of lament, of which there are many in the Bible; but this one is unique because it doesn’t circle its way back to praising God the way all the others do. Psalm 137 just ends in bitterness and defeat.

Israel was broken. That’s what all those bones scattered in the valley signify. They represent the inner condition of Israel’s spirit. Have you ever had your spirit broken? It’s a reality we Americans are conditioned to deny. We live in a “can do” boosterism world where we never say die and pull ourselves up by the bootstraps no matter what. Christianity can be guilty of buying into that false confidence. Sometimes our faith is so hyper-individualistic we almost make people feel ashamed of getting low, of giving up, of wanting to pull the covers over their head. But there are times when that’s all a person, or a community, has the strength to do. It was all Israel could do; their bones were completely dried up.

In another psalm we find the words, “The Lord is near the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” There are times when the only place where God can reach us is at the lowest point in our lives. That’s why Ezekiel is taken to that valley. He has to see where Israel really is; not where he’s been to confront and cajole and encourage them, but where they’re really living. When we are in that valley, when we feel dried up and scattered, when we feel like we have nothing left to give the world and no capacity to receive anything, when we’re truly broken, how can we be repaired?

There’s a phrase in Hebrew that’s become especially important to people who are tired of all the brokenness in the world. The phrase is *tikkun olam*; it means “repairing the world.” Years ago our friend, Rabbi Alex, shared with us the story told by Jewish mystics about creation when God’s light shattered and threw sparks into the universe so that everything in creation was imbued with a spark of divine light. But the sparks are hidden and must be revealed and brought back to their origin, back to God. What was shattered must be repaired. I find this story in Ezekiel a wonderful illustration of how God repairs a broken people so that they can go on to repair a broken world.

We find an element of that in the story of Pentecost. We can’t forget that this story occurs in a particular time and place. It’s first century Jerusalem, a time when the empire of Rome is in control and the people gather at their peril. A large gathering in Jerusalem was always risky because the Roman army was watching them closely, just waiting for a rebellion to break out, as they often did. So already we know things are broken in Jerusalem. And it’s into that brokenness that God’s Holy Spirit erupts to astonish and delight.

The most important feature of this story isn't what is said by the disciples as they tumble out of the building, we're never told what they say, but how what they say is heard. They hear in their native languages. Why is that important? In the Empire there was a common language; most people spoke Greek. That's why the New Testament was written originally in Greek. But language shapes us at a very deep level. A person's native language is the voice of their parents; it's the language of their dreams. I wonder how long it had been for some of the people gathered there since they'd heard anything in their native language? We can imagine in our country a gathering of Native Americans in the late 1800's from all different tribes hearing the gospel proclaimed in Navajo or Iroquois or Cherokee. Imagine the tears that would fall to hear a language they'd been forbidden to speak for generations. Something broken is being repaired as the Holy Spirit empowers the disciples, and the people gathered hear in languages long denied them.

Repairing the world is the work the Holy Spirit empowers us to do. That begins within ourselves; it's through the Holy Spirit that God repairs what's broken within us. But it's meant to be taken out into the world; it can never be only about us. Last year and this year I met with our three confirmation students, Sara, Charlie and Matt. We used a version of the Bible called The Poverty and Justice Bible. It's a regular translation, the Contemporary English Version, but when you flip through the pages you see that a lot of the passages are highlighted in the text. All the verses that address issues of poverty and justice are highlighted. The first thing you notice is it's full of them. You can barely go to a page without finding something in yellow. It's amazing how much of the Jewish scripture and the New Testament are devoted to repairing the world.

There's another section of these Bibles that take up certain contemporary topics and provide references to where scripture has something to say about them and some questions to ask to guide our thinking. It's a good way to help make what we find in the Bible, this ancient document, relevant for the realities we face today. I think part of learning to be an active member of a congregation is to figure out how our faith speaks to us where we live. We're constantly challenged in the church to offer people an alternative to the consumer driven, self-oriented perspective the world feeds them every day. The way of compassion and justice we learn from scripture is how what's broken is repaired.

So, today we celebrate with Matt, Charlie and Sara their decision to enter a deeper relationship with the church and begin a new leg of their journey. Today we give thanks for the ways the Holy Spirit calls us all, not just these three, but all of us, to see what's broken around us and discover ways to repair the world....