

UNBIND HIM, LET HIM GO



Scripture:

Ezekiel 37:1-6

¹The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. ²He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. ³He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know." ⁴Then he said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. ⁵Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. ⁶I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD."

John 11:1-16 & 32-45

¹Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. ²Mary was the one who anointed the Lord with perfume and wiped his feet with her hair; her brother Lazarus was ill. ³So the sisters sent a message to Jesus, "Lord, he whom you love is ill." ⁴But when Jesus heard it, he said, "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it." ⁵Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, ⁶after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. ⁷Then after this he said to the disciples, "Let us go to Judea again." ⁸The disciples said to him, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and are you going there again?" ⁹Jesus answered, "Are there not twelve hours of daylight? Those who walk during the day do not stumble, because they see the light of this world. ¹⁰But those who walk at night stumble, because the light is not in them." ¹¹After saying this, he told them, "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awaken him." ¹²The disciples said to him, "Lord, if he has fallen asleep, he will be all right." ¹³Jesus, however, had been speaking about his death, but they thought that he was referring merely to sleep. ¹⁴Then Jesus told them plainly, "Lazarus is dead. ¹⁵For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him." ¹⁶Thomas, who was called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

³²When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ³³When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. ³⁴He said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." ³⁵Jesus began to weep. ³⁶So the Jews said, "See how he loved him!" ³⁷But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

³⁸Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. ³⁹Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead four days." ⁴⁰Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?" ⁴¹So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. ⁴²I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me." ⁴³When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" ⁴⁴The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."

⁴⁵Many of the Jews therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what Jesus did, believed in him.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Every two years the Presbyterian Church (USA) holds a nationwide meeting somewhere in the United States to discuss and evaluate how we are doing as a denomination. This year the meeting, the General Assembly as it is called, was held in Portland, Oregon. I had the opportunity to attend the General Assembly and was assigned the job of being a committee assistant to the Peacemaking and International Issues Committee. It was a great committee to be assigned to and work with. The work of the committee was fascinating, and the assembly was as well.

I could spend the next three or four hours telling you about all of the business that was conducted at this year's assembly, but if I did that you would get up and leave after the first fifteen minutes. So I will spare you the details and instead this morning, I just want to highlight what I feel were the main areas of focus of this year's assembly.

BELHAR CONFESSION

Our congregational prayer this morning was from the newly adopted Belhar confession. This is the first confession in the Presbyterian Book of Confessions that was written by a church outside of Europe or North America. The confession was written by the Dutch Reformed Black South African Church in 1986; during apartheid. I hope you will take the time to read the entire confession; we read just a small part of it this morning. I think its inclusion into our Book of Confessions brings a whole new perspective to what it means to be a Christian, especially in the post-modern world in which we now live.

THE WAY FORWARD

In many ways, that was the central theme of this year's General Assembly. It was all about what it means to be the church in the 21st century. One of the GA committee's work dealt exclusively with the numerous overtures that wanted to mold the church of the future. The committee was called "The Way Forward," and the only business this committee dealt with was how do we do church in the future. As you probably know church attendance in the United States has plummeted in the last fifty years. In the Presbyterian Church alone our membership has gone from over four million members to under two million in the last fifty years. And we are not alone; of the top ten protestant Churches in the US all of them have had serious attendance declines since the 1960's. The Catholic Church is the only growing Church in the United States and it is only growing because of the Hispanic population that has immigrated to the US.

So with those staggering statics the General Assembly felt it was critically important to talk about

'how do we do church in today's world? Now this is not a new question; in fact, the church has been asking that question since its inception, since its very beginnings in the first century.

EZEKIEL

In our scripture reading from Ezekiel this morning we find ourselves in a valley of dry bones. It was a place that once was full of life, but is now dead.

God asks Ezekiel, "Mortal, can these bones live?"

Ezekiel answers God, "O Lord you know."

Just as Ezekiel answered God, we too must answer God in the same way. "O Lord you know," and only you know. I think in many respects the way we will need to do church in the future is really unknown to us. The society we live in has dramatically changed in the last fifty years. The church that so effectively led God's people in the recent past is no longer able to spread the Good News in the same way. God has something new in mind, probably different from what we are accustomed to. I don't know what it is, but the breath of God will most certainly lead us to that place, whether we are ready for it or not.

MISERY OVER MYSTERY

**I think it is in our DNA, our human nature
that we prefer the known, no matter
how bad it is, to the unknown,
no matter how much better the
unknown might potentially be.
We so often choose misery over mystery.**

We prefer the miserable life that we know, verses living in the potential mystery of the unknown. Now, that is not to say that we all live miserable, sorry, unhappy lives; no, I am not saying that at all. But there is definitely something in us that often causes us to cling to the safe, the known, even if the life we are living isn't as meaningful and satisfying as it once was. I know that tendency is in me. We fear the mystery and what it might be. And yet if we put our trust and faith in Christ, and make Jesus the Lord of our lives, the unknown, the mystery, of life will become our friend, our companion on the road of life.

LAZARUS

In our scripture reading from John, Jesus gets word that his good friend Lazarus is sick and near death. But Jesus doesn't immediately leave to go heal him; it is a couple of days before he travels to Judea where Lazarus lives. When Jesus finally does arrive Lazarus has been dead for four days. Lazarus' two sisters, Martha and

Mary, are mourning the loss of their brother. They are angry with Jesus for not coming sooner. They felt if Jesus had been there he would have healed Lazarus and he would not have died.

And then Jesus did the impossible, the unthinkable: he raises Lazarus from the dead.

I read that story and wonder like the sisters, why had Jesus not come sooner. Why was it more important for Jesus to raise Lazarus from the dead rather than just simply healing the man while he was still alive? It certainly was more dramatic and brought a whole lot more attention to Jesus than if he just simply healed Lazarus like all the other people he had cured of their illnesses. But I think Jesus intentionally did what he did. I think he was making the point that sometimes things need to die before they can be reborn or renewed.

The disciple Thomas had suggested to Jesus and the other disciples upon hearing of the death of Lazarus to, "Let us also go, that we may die with him."

But Jesus did just the exact opposite of what one of his most faithful followers suggested. Jesus has a different idea. We are not going back Judea to die; we are going back to Judea to not only raise Lazarus from the dead, but to raise us all from that old way of thinking. We are going back to Judea to a place where in the recent past we were unwelcomed, ridiculed, and heckled. Jesus showed everyone who lived in Judea that there is a new way of living at hand. If you put your trust in the Lord your eyes will be opened to a new way of living. The old is dead and the new, the unknown, the mystery of new life and the new possibilities it holds, is just unfolding.

Upon Lazarus' resurrection Jesus said, "Unbind him, and let him go."

And that was what General Assembly in Portland was really all about. It was all about how do we take a two-hundred-fifty year old protestant Christian denomination that is struggling to be relevant in today's world and breathe new life into it? In many ways I think the message Jesus was conveying to his followers upon Lazarus resurrection is in many ways the same message he is giving us today. Jesus is willing and able to breathe new life into all of us, if we are willing to follow him wherever he may lead. And his leading will no doubt take us into unknown places and unknown spaces.

WICHITA, KANSAS

I heard a great story last week about going into the unknown. The Wichita, Kansas Police Department, in an effort to build trust and stronger ties to the African American community, co-hosted a barbeque with the Black Lives Matter group in Wichita last Sunday. The Black Lives Matter group was planning a protest for that day, but after meeting with the Police Chief, they agreed that doing a barbecue instead of the protest was an idea

worth pursuing. The event was called "First Steps Community Cookout." The police played basketball, in their police uniforms, with the kids who attended the event.

The police officers ate a meal and even danced with the leaders of the Black Lives Matter group.

A mother of one of the boys who attended said, "It was a bonding moment where the police saw them as children and my sons got to see them as people! It was a great first step."

The Wichita Eagle newspaper reported that, "At one table, three men - a black man, a Hispanic man and a white man - sat down with burgers next to police Lt. Travis Rakestraw to share their ideas."

"It was the first time since 1992 that Jarvis Scott, the black man, said he'd sat down with a police officer, and the other two men said it was their first time ever sitting down with an officer."

**The BBQ cookout was a simple idea,
getting people together
to talk about their lives.
It made all the difference in the world
in how each group viewed the other.
A new breath was breathed into the
relationships between the Wichita Police
and the citizens of the town.
It was the beginning of the
unbinding of the two groups.
And it all started with a simple idea.
The event enabled common ground
to be found by all involved.**

I think there is a lesson in that story for us as a church as well. We no doubt will need to reach out of our comfort zone to do it, but there are many opportunities for us to engage our neighbors and our community as well. And that was the focus of this year's General Assembly: Breathing new life and unbinding us from our restrictive past.

NEW BREATH

The main items of business of the previous six or more General Assemblies have been dominated by several important issues: the ordination standards of clergy, same sex marriage and whether we should divest from companies that do business in the west bank of Israel. There have been other hot item issues, but those had been the three that have dominated discussion and resources for the last two decades or more. These were very important issues; they drove the agenda of the meetings of the previous General Assemblies. Fortunately in the last few General Assemblies these issues have been somewhat resolved. They were still

discussed at this GA but they no longer dominated the agenda of the meeting. For that I am very thankful.

By having some sort of positive resolution of these issues at both the 2012 and 2014 General Assemblies, it freed the 2016 assembly to deal with the issues that had gotten pushed to the fringes in the past decade. As much as the delegates to previous assemblies listened to God and attempted to breathe some new life into our tired denomination, the vision and energy was lacking on the not so front and center issues.

I think that this assembly showed that we indeed have a new breath that is being breathed into us. To start with we have the new Belhar Confession. Gradye Parsons our Stated Clerk retired and as a result we have a new Stated Clerk. The Stated Clerk is the highest elected office in the Presbyterian Church (USA); the Stated Clerk is the spokes-person for the church. J. Herbert Nelson was elected to that position; he is the first African American to ever hold that office in the PC (USA). For the first time ever, co-Moderators were elected to lead the church for the next two years. In the past a moderator was elected and they chose their own vice moderator. These co-moderators ran as a team. The new moderators are both pastors and both are women, one African American and one Caucasian. One is a pastor in an inner city church in Washington, D.C., the other from the suburbs of Chicago.

There was also serious discussion about how to realign the leadership structure of the denomination as well as consolidating offices and roles in light of a much smaller denomination.

NEW WORSHIPPING COMMUNITIES

But way more importantly there was a lot of discussion of how we as individual congregations can better serve the mission of Christ in the current environment in which we live. Six years ago the 2010 GA approved the idea of starting one-thousand and one new worshiping communities in the next ten years. This initiative has resulted in some very unique, very different ways of doing church. I think these new worshiping communities give us some ideas on how we can do church in new, innovative and vital ways.

Some of the new worshiping communities that are being started include some very strong, growing churches that forego worship one or two Sundays a month and work on a day long service project in their community, instead of normal Sunday morning worship. Their emphasis is all about service and serving the communities they live in.

There are new worshiping communities where the focus of worship is not quietly sitting in the pews and listening to the preacher or the music, but interacting with the pastor as the sermon is preached, as well as

playing a more active role in worship. They are engaging in what is called emergent worship.

There are groups that are foregoing the worship that we are so accustomed to and including dance, drama and music as the central acts of worship, replacing the traditional sermon all together. And they are drawing a very active new group of previously un-churched folks to their worshiping communities.

Some of these new worshiping communities are giving up formal church buildings all together and are meeting as small groups in someone's home. They do worship and community building in their living rooms or backyards. There are active groups of Christians who meet in pubs and have developed a strong community of faith over lively conversation and a good beer. One of my favorites is a group of bicyclists that gather together and go on long bike rides; they have great theological discussions and talk about how their faith influences their lives. They call themselves "sweaty sheep."

God is indeed breathing a new breath into these worshiping communities. Yes, these are not what you and I might consider church, but I know what we consider church is vastly different than what the first century church looked like or even the nineteenth century church. "Unbind him, and let him go." Jesus is saying those words to the church today just as he was to his followers when he raised Lazarus from the dead.

Will God raise Lazarus from the dead once again? Can these dry bones live again? Can new life be breathed into Church of the Roses, into the Presbyterian Church USA, into the Christian Church in America? Absolutely, but we need to be willing to let the breath of God get inside each and every one of us for that to happen. We need to unbind ourselves from our traditional ways of thinking and doing things, and be open to a new breath of life coming into our midst.

Unbind us O God, and let us go. Amen



Elder Christ Rhodes
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405