

English Translation of Today's Sermon
Liberando el Espiritu | Liberating the Spirit

Pentecost Sunday | May 20, 2018
Rev. Maria Swearingen

As you have already heard, this past week a group from Calvary had the opportunity to travel to El Salvador to connect with our sister church and the Shalom scholars. We also went on a pilgrimage of sorts to learn more about this beautiful country, its history, its struggles and its people. Because El Salvador's people are also our people represented here in our community of faith. Now that we've gotten back, I sense more than ever that our history as a church and as a country is powerfully connected to El Salvador.

After being in El Salvador this past week I'll never be able to read this text in Ezekiel the same way. I'll never be able to read this prophetic story without thinking of Mozote. I won't be able to read this story about the valley of bones without thinking of Rufina Amaya, without thinking of the excavation of bodies of children, families. So many people robbed of life in the midst of violence that my own country, the United States, is complicit in.

But in order for there to be a true "Never Again" we need to understand our past to understand our present. That's not something that we're doing well at all in the United States. In our schools and in our national discourse, it is always a struggle to talk honestly about our past. A past that is undeniably shaped by slavery, violence, and colonization. A past that many people with power and economic interests want to hide and forget. We know that in ancient times army after army, state after state, empire after empire, principality after principality has betrayed a holy God and a holy humanity with its violence. And we know that the people: working the land with few rights are the ones who suffered the consequences of that violence.

The Israelites in this moment in Ezekiel aren't any different. Here we have a people who are wrapped up in the mess of war, domination and indifference. The Israelites were slaves in the Babylonian Empire, lost, far from their homeland, far from their homes, dying under kings who didn't care about them. And it's right there that God has a word for God's people. And God begins to give the prophet a word, "Ezekiel, talk to them. Tell them the truth. Tell them that I am coming to the valley of bones with my Spirit to reclaim my people."

We see in this moment in the valley of dry bones that the Spirit is the keeper of the past. The Spirit has not forgotten her people and she has not forgotten what has happened to her people. You cannot hide a history of violence from the Spirit because the Spirit is inspiration for the truth, a wind from the past blowing in the present. Sometimes that wind is like a gentle whisper and sometimes it is a loud cry shaking the earth.

The Spirit animates the present. The Spirit doesn't live only in history watching the past. The Spirit is working and healing and transforming right now. The Spirit is joining bones together, forming tendons and recovering with skin every single one of us. The Spirit is a spirit of Now.

And finally, the Spirit is the sustenance of the future. We see that God has a plan for the people of Israel, and the people of El Salvador, and the people of the US, and the people of Palestine, and the people of Mexico. God says to Ezekiel, “When the people feel stuck in desperation, tell them you think that you’re dead, but I am your God. I will open up your graves where you think you are buried and I will raise you up.”

Here God says that God has a plan for the people’s sustenance. When they think they can’t go any longer, that there isn’t a way, that the only thing they can see is death’s grave, God says, “I am the Spirit of Life.” The Hebrew here for Spirit is the word Ruah. And Ruah means spirit and it also means Breath. God is Breath for today and tomorrow and the next day when we think we cannot go any longer. The Spirit, the Breath, the Ruah of Life promises us animation, power, presence right there in the middle of the valley of dry bones. The Spirit cries out with a loud voice, “El Mozote: Never Again.”

So today, I claim the God of Ruah, the God of Breath. I claim a God who raises us from the valley and gives us life again. I claim the Spirit of liberation that never forgets the past, that never stops giving power in the present, that never stops sustaining the future.

The Bible says that when the people of Israel received Breath, or Ruah, that they looked like an army. But this army is completely different from the armies of the world, isn’t it?

This is an army that has on “belt of truth and the breastplate of justice. Shoes that will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. A shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of evil. A helmet of salvation, and a sword [not of metal, but] of the Spirit.”

On the day of Pentecost, we see that people from all over the world are worshipping the God of liberation. People who have survived the abuses of the Roman Empire, the Egyptian Empire, empires from all over the world. And right there, using the languages of those empires, mixed with the indigenous languages that were repressed by those same empires, right there... with resurrected bodies and without fear... right there, these earlier followers proclaimed a prophecy of hope for the people.

“In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.
Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.”

We see that in Ezekiel and in Acts and in this church, the Spirit of God is moving in history, is moving among the people, is moving through the empires of the world without fear. The Spirit of God, with eyes full on the past, the present and the future will give us Ruah, Breath, Life, and right in the middle of the valley of dry bones.