

Thomas Long, a preaching professor, tells of teaching a confirmation class in which he was discussing the major festivals of the Christian year. The young folks in the class knew about Christmas and Easter, but no one in the class could remember what Pentecost was and is. Tom explained to the class that Pentecost was the day when the Holy Spirit came from heaven with the sound of a rushing wind and with tongues of fire that rested on the heads of the early disciples of Jesus, giving them the ability to speak in different languages, a reality which caused observers to think that the disciples were drunk. At this point, one girl raised her hand and said, "I don't remember that. My family and I must have been out of town on that Sunday."

Pentecost is not a well-known celebration in the church, much less in our culture. For the early church, it was the second most important festival of the year, outranking Christmas big time. It's too bad that Pentecost doesn't get a lot of press because its special effects are so compelling, and its message is so life-giving for a culture like ours.

For me, some of the best special effects are not only Luke's rushing winds, tongues of fire, and disciples who spontaneously speak languages they don't know, but also Ezekiel's valley of dry bones. It's hard to beat this story in terms of wild special effects. "The 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. He led me all around them; there were many lying in the valley, and they were very dry."

These bones have been there for a very long time. Think of this as a mass grave, a field full of bones of soldiers who were killed a long time ago. No one did anything about them. They were left to rot. I guess no one had time to attend to them, or no one cared enough to bury them. They are really dead, dry, brittle bones. There is absolutely no life in them. Nothing can bring these dead bones back to life. It is much too late for any hope.

But Ezekiel says that that is not true, which is why he, a spokesperson for God, is told to prophesy to these bones. "Prophesy to them and say to

them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord: I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.”

Wow! This is so good. So dramatic. Such great special effects. Such wildness. Admittedly, God is often associated with staidness. Religion is often thought to be a stabilizing, conservative force. And frankly, we need stabilizing, conservative forces. We need something that can ground us and keep us from responding to all the desires of our self-centered, uninhibited selves. Watching what is going on in our nation these days points to the need for religion’s ability to keep us in check. Unchecked, we can do some really dumb things.

But the Spirit of Pentecost is a wild spirit! The Spirit of Pentecost is not a spirit of staidness, the same old same old. The Spirit of Pentecost is a spirit of rushing winds and tongues of fire. There is nothing tame about rushing winds and burning fires. While the Spirit is often described as a comforter, and John’s gospel validates that this is an appropriate image, the Spirit discovered in Ezekiel’s and in Acts’ special effects is a spirit of radical change.

Disciples gathered for a traditional party get all worked up. They get ecstatic. That is, they get outside of themselves. They get wild. They start boldly proclaiming good news in languages that they don’t even speak. They are drunk, right? No, what’s happening is the result of the wild spirit of God, the wild spirit of God that Joel talked about when he said: “In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, a spirit given to men and women alike, slave and free alike. This is a spirit that will enable them to prophesy, to speak wildly and unexpectedly, which is what is happening at this sedate Pentecost party.” This a life-and world-changing day, which is why Joel tells us that the whole creation is taking note. The heavens are declaring the glory of God. The heavens are noting the wildness of God. Eclipses, when the sun turns to darkness, and blood moons, when the moon turns to red during a lunar eclipse, thought to be signs of the end by the ancients, reveal that the world is ruled by a wild spirit who brings about wild change.

While Acts' special effects are incredible, I want to return to Ezekiel's wildness, for his vision is especially poignant for our era. Ezekiel tells us that the dead bones are a picture of the "whole house of Israel." This house keeps on saying, "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost." The occasion for this prophecy is the exile, the time when the Babylonians destroyed the city of Jerusalem and its temple and sent many of Israel's brightest and best, including Ezekiel himself, into exile. It was a horrible time, a time unmatched in its horribleness until the Holocaust. Because of the exile, the nation felt totally cut off, completely dead, hopeless. And Ezekiel is telling his people that it ain't over, that God's wild spirit has the ability to breathe new life into old bones. After all, the wind of God breathed life into a bag of bones known as Adam, creating a living soul. The wild spirit of God is a life-giving, life-breathing spirit. It is a spirit that gives hope where there is no hope.

You know, it strikes me that what Pentecost brings us is a wildness of imagination. This is a day that begs us to trust that God is not finished with the world. God is not finished with the church. God is not finished with you and me. That promise is meant to give us holy imagination, imagination about the power of the holy, the power of God, to bring new life where it seems there is only death.

We often belittle imagination, calling people to live in the "real world," telling our children to repress their lives of fantasy and day dreaming, asking our college students to get beyond their naïve notions about a world transformed. Imagination is required if life and the world are ever going to be changed. If we don't dream dreams and see visions with the old and young men of Acts, the world, our lives will be forever the same. But the promise from Ezekiel is that the Spirit of God is on the side of change, that is, will bring new life to old bones.

Undoubtedly, the old bones are everywhere to be seen. There's lots of valleys of dry bones. They are laying in Gaza and Israel. They are laying in Ukraine. They are to be found among people whose bad decisions leave them feeling hopeless. They are to be discovered in relationships that the

very energy of life has been sucked out of. They can be seen in people whose grief has caused them to think that there is no future for them. Dead bones are what life looks like for those who are overwhelmed by loneliness, who are dealing with the consequences of divorce. Dead bones is what an earth traumatized by climate change feels like.

So I ask, as Ezekiel asks: can these bones live? Ezekiel is convinced that they can because the wild Spirit of God is in the business of breathing new life into old bones. We need the wildness of imagination that trusts that. What is going on in Gaza and Israel need not be. Oh, you say! These folks have been fighting for centuries. Yes, they have. But the story isn't over if we trust that the wild Spirit of God brings new life to old bones, if we put to work the holy imagination that is our call. And the story isn't over for people in deep grief. It's not over for the lonely. It's not over for our devastated earth. It's not over for the newly divorced. It's not over for struggling congregations. It's not over even for the dead and dying ones. It's not over for you or me.

We desperately need Pentecost today. Apathy and despair are running rampant in our time. Loads of people want to throw in the towel. The suicide rates are at an all-time high. The number of people hiding in their basements and homes in loneliness is growing. But you and I have a message of hope that the Spirit of wildness wants us to take to the ends of the earth. Thus says the Lord God, "I am going to open your graves and bring you up from your graves, O *my* people!" Imagine that!