

Wombs and tombs (Pentecost B) (*Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:22-27*)

God's Spirit before birth and after death

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The Pentecost lessons offer an interesting juxtaposition between Ezekiel's valley of the dry bones and Paul's image of the church and the whole creation groaning with labor pains.

In Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of a mass open grave. Its dead are not just dead but decomposed and picked clean. It's no surprise that when God asks if these bones can live, the prophet declines to answer. But the prophet repeats God's proclamation to the bones that they will live, and they reassemble themselves into whole bodies, covered again with flesh and connected with sinews. Then the prophet has to speak to the breath (or wind, or spirit), and the breath/wind/spirit obeys God and revives the dead.

The two-stage revival of the dry bones offers an analogy to acts of recovery and recreation. It is possible to re-assemble the form without the breath of life.

And in the reading itself, even the revivification of the dead is only a type for a different miracle: the return of exiled Israel to its own land and the restoration of the people's faith and worship, with the gift of God's Spirit.

In the passage from Romans, the site of the Spirit's work is pregnancy and expectation. The arresting image of the first creation groaning in travail with the new creation contrasts with and heightens the image of the divine breath entering the once-dead bones. Neither the first moment of passage nor the last is outside of

the work of that breath. As is so often the case in the scriptures, the biological metaphors finally serve to place God's redemption outside the cycle of birth, growth, and death.

There is a further parallel between the words of the prophet and the prayers of the community in Paul's letter. Ezekiel looks on a scene of hopeless devastation. God has to give him the words to speak to the dry bones. Likewise, Paul says, "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words."

These are words of consolation for those who find themselves tongue-tied before God or, even more, who struggle to even maintain the motivation to pray. It is not easy to look at a scene of mass death and picture the dead being restored, nor to perceive in the agony of groaning the expectation of a new world. It can be still harder to ask for it. But here, as in the mystery before birth and after death, the Spirit speaks where we cannot.