Sermon Text for PENTECOST SUNDAY May 19, 2013

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Ezekiel 37:7-10, Romans 5:1-5

“Holy Spirit Hope”

 I had no idea that Nashville was such a big deal. There was an incredible festive and fun spirit in the air and remember, I was only there during the week. There was a live band in just about every establishment on lower Broadway and they were all really good and they were all hoping to be seen by someone who just might have some pull so they could make it in the big time. It was an incredible atmosphere, a type of block party with everyone milling around.

 The day of Pentecost was not a pot-luck gathering, it was a block party with family and friends from all over the world gathered in Jerusalem having an outdoor picnic, catching up with friends and then Jesus shows up and changes everything. Okay, not Jesus the person but the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised he would send once he left, that’s what shows up and the situation goes from a block party to a teaching moment for those gathered that Jesus Christ is the center of our hope. And so the church was established.

 So what does the day of Pentecost have to do with us today? Well, today we find the Holy Spirit the protagonist of Pentecost moving in our lives in both of these Scriptures. In Ezekiel the Holy Spirit takes that which is dead and gives it life and reminds us that a church without the Spirit, or without a vision given to it by the Holy Spirit, I nothing but a cadaver, an empty shell. In Ezekiel the Holy Spirit gives life to the people literally. Romans, likewise, we find the Holy Spirit provide hope which ultimately establishes meaning and purpose for our future.

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 George Bernard Shaw described people in two different categories: Some see things as they are and ask why, others dream of things that never were and ask why not? Today we will find that people of hope ask why not. Followers of Jesus Christ ask why not. Those having a picnic in Jerusalem asked why not on that day of Pentecost.

 Ezekiel was faced with a situation that most in his place would have asked why. We really do live in a why weary world. As a general rule we check for liability before we wonder about the possibility. We rehash our past mistakes and ask why. WE look at our lot in life with our job, our family, our health, and we ask why, why Lord did you give me this cross to bear. Why did I lose my job, why is my marriage breaking up, why is my body falling apart.

 In a why weary world there is no hope. At the preacher’s conference he told of a funeral he did in the city and a young man had been gunned down, he was part of a gang. He was in Baltimore right at the start of the gang violence and at this funeral a whole group of gang members showed up to his church. The church was quite a buzz with the ushers being as polite as they ever were. You are welcome to sit anywhere that you choose. After the service the congregation was invited forward to pay their last respects. The leader of the gang walked up with the whole rest of the group and he laid his hand on the casket and he said- see you real soon, real soon. A why weary world. That’s what we live in.

 That’s what Ezekiel was looking out in that valley. It was the Old Testament version of the day of Pentecost. A valley of dry bones, bones of his people, the Jewish people, lifeless, no hope at all. God tells Ezekiel speak to them, have them stand. Okay, why not, Ezekiel answers. He does and the sinews attach to the bones, they rattle together and stand together. But wait, something is missing. Ezekiel, ask God to send his wind, his breath, his ruach, his pneuma to enter into these bones, and then see what happens. You know the background right? We say it every Pentecost, just in case some of you might be worshipping here for the first time and know nothing about Pentecost, or why we wear read…Read Acts 2 – Jesus has died, the disciples are gathered for a block party with other Jews from around the world. The room in which they find themselves is filled with a wind and flames of fire stand above the heads of those present. Those from around the world are speaking different languages and yet they are perfectly understood. The Holy Spirit was sent to the church and the church received it.

 The word Spirit in Hebrew is ruach, and Greek it is pneuma and it means spirit, wind and breath. That’s the context so let’s look at Ezekiel again. Ezekiel, ask God to send his Holy Spirit upon these bones. Okay, why not? And God’s Holy Spirit descends upon these bones and takes this dead nation of which only a remnant remained, this petrified church and gave it life. They stood as a multitude, alive.

 Only those who have been willing to ask the question why not, have ever really changed the world. God’s Spirit is so powerful, and we are talking about the Holy Spirit today, His grace is so powerful that even those things in the world that work against God, through the Holy Spirit they actually end up serving God’s purposes.

 Our Romans Scripture gives us a perfect sequential understanding to that. Follow along and see how verses 1-5 go in sequence to lead us where we need to be today. The Holy Spirit provides us with a hope that allows us to always be Why Not people. Keep in mind that Romans 5 is not a typical Pentecost Scripture. Ezekiel is, but not Romans. You see Romans was written by the Apostle Paul who wrote 2/3 of the entire New Testament. His writings shape what we believe and Romans more than any other book in the Bible gives us our practical theology. How do we practice our faith. I never liked that that term practicing. I’m a practicing Christian, I’m a practicing Protestant, Catholic, Jew. For what are you practicing. When are you going to be doing it for real?

 He begins chapter 5 by laying out the most fundamental belief in Christian faith which actually gives us the hope of life. We have been justified by faith. God has justified, declared us innocent and implanted within us a faith in Jesus Christ that we have to claim as our own. We have been declare not guilty. Think of this past week and those who have been declared guilty at least in the public eye: Jodi Arias who recognizes her guilt but doesn’t want to face it and so has asked for the death penalty, the IRS – guilty, Ariel Castro – way guilty, OJ, guilty again…wait, no maybe, not sure. Jahar – guilty. So if Jesus justifies us and makes us not guilty even though we have been caught red handed and even though our names should be mentioned along with those that I just mentioned. What did you say? Did I hear you say that you don’t belong in that list. Just in case we forget: Romans, remember that book, Romans 3:23, who knows it by heart? All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. And the wages of that sin is what? Death? Not life in prison. But, wait, Jesus says not guilty, to all of us.

 That provides us, vs. 2 tells us, a hope in being able to share in Jesus’ glory. That is how we base our hope. That hope produces peace. Those who ask why are without peace and have no certainty of their salvation in Jesus. Those who ask why find themselves deserting Jesus at the most crucial time.

 The gift of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost allows us to ask why not even in the most difficult times in our lives. Paul talks about suffering here in these verses. Especially we find him mention it in verses. 3-4. The suffering of Paul is very well known. He goes through a litany of trials and tribulations that he faced in life. Look at II Corinthians 11:23-28 where he says the following – with far great labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received forty lashes minus one. Three times I was shipwrecked, for a night and a day I was adrift at sea, on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own peole, danger from the gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters, in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hngry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And I never asked why, it was always why not and it allowed me to persevere.

 Please realize that ever single letter that is written in this Bible was written by someone who faced an entire life of persecution. Every single letter was written by someone who was a minority that was targeted for sport and targeted for killing or slavery. It was written by a people who didn’t know if this word that they wrote on this day might be their last.

 Paul was nothing like us. I know, we should feel some kind of closeness to the people in the Bible, but they were nothing like us. There are how many US citizens in the world? About 300 million. Canadians, Chinese, Jewish people 13 million. They represent about .01% of the population and yet in regards to nobel prizes they represent 25%, Academy Awards 45%, and the list goes on and on. How is that possible?

 Because of what Paul is talking about in verses 3-4, they know how their people have suffered and they still have living relatives who were physically tortured and their loved ones exterminated. Passover doesn’t become a ritual of Moses leading the people out of Egypt, it is a 21st century reality that is being taught to 22nd century kids lived every year by these families.

 During lent we read Scripture, sometimes, before our meal. But then we faltered and haven’t continued it. The sense of identity that our kids are missing is our fault. We aren’t able to point to our kids and tell them of God’s deliverance and say: Why not? What happened to our church on the day of Pentecost 2,000 years ago was God’s wake up call to us saying why not. And Paul here in Romans gives us what we need to strengthen the faith of our families.

 He tells us in verse 5 that the Holy Spirit pours the love of Christ into our hearts, and so as a result we will not be disappointed. God has given us all we need to be able to learn how to move from why Christians to those with fire in our eyes ask why not. It all revolves in our ability to boast in what Christ did for us. Our identity as a church has to be a church that always look at the world and at each other with hope.

 What an incredible contrast I saw in Nashville. I saw a small park with a whole population of homeless, a tiny park in the middle of the city and I thought I hadn’t seen anything like this since Moscow. Across the street from the park was a church and a line of people snaked all the way into the heart of the church. Those in line were homeless but they casually mingled with members of the church so that one or the other were indistinguishable.

 I made my way up to the conference to the biggest church in town, and all around the church, for two city blocks, a wrought iron fence surrounded it with intermitten gates that had padlocks on them that would be opened only on Sunday. Two other churches were similarly attired with one of them having two bold signs in its windows saying “No Trespassing”, and the other church was a little more gracious with a sign that said no Trespassing from 5pm-9am. Signs and gates to keep people out of church.

 We are in a transition and I think we can all feel it. We are moving from Why to a Why Not church. The doors are open, people are coming to be baptized, married, to send their kids to preschool, to deal with alcohol recovery, to be buried here, to worship here. Pentecost tells us to be open to all of this and to allow it to happen. The life that was breathed into them old bones in Ezekiel had the hope that Paul was talking about which can be somewhat uncontrollable.

 May God bless us and keep us as we look to be people and a church that is never afraid to ask why not on the basis of the Holy Spirit guiding us. Amen.