

5 Lent
April 10, 2011
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There is a great hunger for spirituality these days, but people seek in the market place for a cure, a path, a way to lift them out of their tombs of want, addiction, oppression. They go shopping for the answer and expect to find it at Wal-Mart, Amazon.com or LL Bean. They fill their shopping carts as if God herself could be stuffed into a bag, as if spirituality were just another thing to take home and put on a shelf.

But God is no-thing, and when one starts to notice the movement of no-thing-ness, one is surprised, awed, afraid, revitalized, inspired. For God is like the wind, she cannot be seen directly but only in her effects, she can be heard if one listens deeply, with the ear of the heart. And her effects can be surprising, even devastating. They cannot be controlled, they astonish, seemingly coming from nowhere and going to nowhere, but in between, here and now, that is where the action is.

In the Bible, the words used for Spirit mean “breath” or “wind”: ruach in Hebrew and pneuma in Greek. “In the beginning,” it says in Genesis 1:1, “when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was formless and void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” And in Genesis 2:7, God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and the man became a living being.” And in our first reading for today, when the Ezekial prophesied, said the Lord, God will cause breath to enter into the valley of dry bones that is Israel, and they shall live. And a few weeks ago we heard from the third chapter of the gospel of John. Nicodemus is confused when the Jesus says, “No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.” And Jesus explains: “The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.” And finally in Acts Chapter 2, we will soon hear about how on the day of Pentecost, the disciples were all gathered in one room. “Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting.” People from all nations lived in Jerusalem and gathered at the sound and were astonished to hear the disciples speaking in the various languages of each. Some thought they were drunk. But Peter denied they were inebriated and quoted Joel: “God declares [he] will pour out his spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and our old men shall dream dreams.” From the moment of creation to Jesus earthly mission through the very foundations of the Christian church, the Spirit breathes and astonishes, surprises and awakens new life.

What fascinates me is that this spirit seems totally unpredictable, even chaotic: “It blows where it chooses” usually shocking people into waking up to the overwhelming power of God. It is revolutionary, bursting the bounds of one faith, Judaism, to reach out to the whole world. And yet, we are sitting here, now, in an institutionalized church barnacled with tradition. The Spirit, from age to age, is concretized, controlled, but it still breaks out where it wills breathing new life into old wine skins.

Even in our reading for today, we have people that want to control Jesus, even blame him. We have the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus who all loved Jesus in their own ways. The sisters sent word that Lazarus was ill, but Jesus says it is for the glory of God and instead of rushing to his beloved’s bedside, he lingers two more days. Then he says

he will go to Judea again, and the disciples object that the Jews there will try to stone him. But he goes to Bethany, only two miles from Jerusalem, where Lazarus has been dead four days. Many of the Jews had come to console the sisters in their grief. Martha, the sister who was always busy serving Jesus, ran to meet Jesus and blamed him, "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." Martha did not believe that Jesus would raise her brother from the dead though she believed in Jesus as Messiah. And Mary, the one who was content to remain at Jesus' feet listening while Martha was busy with many things, when she came to Jesus, she too blamed him: "Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died." They led him to the tomb of Lazarus, where all wept, including Jesus, for he loved Lazarus.

And Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. It was Mary who pointed out, as the King James version would have it, "He stinketh." But despite that, all were astonished, when Lazarus came out, bound with strips of cloth, alive.

It is curious that in Lent we have resurrection, but we need faith to have gotten this far through the season of reflection and confession, of abstention and watching and waiting. And we need hope to get us through Palm Sunday, the dark days of Holy Week to Easter resurrection and finally to Pentecost.

Of course, we may be told to wake up and come out of our tombs at any time, any place. The seasons of the Christian year may be in linear sequence, but it is the meaning of each season that is important, for we are in mythic time. So, towards the end of Lent, from a tomb of stinking death, Lazarus arises alive! All are astonished, God is glorified and some even believe.

You can't buy that astonishment. You won't find it even at a big box store. For it comes when it is least expected, awakening you to new life, creating new paths for you to tread that may well take you beyond what you hope into unimagined countryside. You cannot control where you are going if you listen to the sound of the spirit and follow it. You may weep and gnash your teeth because your tomb of addiction may hold you, but if chosen, you may be tossed into unknown seas.

Jesus will soon pray, "please take this cup from me," but he knows he must follow God's will to the tomb and beyond. We too must know well the tombs we are in, know how dead we are, before we not only hear but follow God's voice, the voice that spoke creation into being, the breath that breathed across the waters of formlessness and void, the breath of prophesy that rattled the bones, knitting sinew and flesh together into living souls, the breath that kindles in us the Kingdom of God, that can speak through us in ministry as God gifts us, renewing our lives and quickening the church, this church, to life in new times, shaking the foundations till the stones themselves sing out, all around us, "Glory to God in the highest." Amen.