



## BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

**Day of Pentecost (B)**  
**May 23, 2021**

**RCL: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 104:25-35, 37; Acts 2:1-21; John 15:26-27, 16:4-15**

### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

“On the fifth day of the month (it was the fifth year of the exile of King Jehoiachin), the word of the Lord came to the priest Ezekiel son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the Lord was on him there.”

That’s how the book of Ezekiel opens. Ezekiel is a priest, and priests belong in the Temple, right? He’s an Israelite, and Israelites belong in Israel. But he’s not in Israel, he’s in Babylon. And he’s not in the Temple, he’s sitting on the banks of a random irrigation ditch. Ezekiel had spent his youth preparing for priestly ministry, awaiting the day when he would turn thirty years old and be ordained to serve in the Temple. But before he could turn thirty, the Babylonian army showed up, and took it all away. What the prophets had been warning Israel of for generations had actually happened. Jerusalem is just gone. The Temple is just gone. And Ezekiel, along with thousands of his countrymen, is carted off to a very strange land.

What a confusing time for Ezekiel. His thirtieth birthday arrives, and not only is there no ordination ceremony, but also everything he was ever taught about being human is utterly demolished. So many questions must have run through his mind: What does it mean that God rescued you from Egypt if he could not protect you from Babylon? How do you celebrate the Passover? How do you ring in the new year? How do you thank God for the harvest? Or atone for your sins? Or make any kind of offering at all? How can you be a people here? How can you even be a person here? It’s such a lonely feeling. You don’t think it can get any worse than this, but you stay awake at night, in fear that it will.

But then Ezekiel has a vision. God shows him an image of this hopelessness they all have: it’s a grisly scene – an army fought a battle and lost. Not only did they lose, but they were all slaughtered. Not only were they slaughtered, but they were left in the valley to rot. Not only were they left in the valley to rot, but they were left there for years and years and years, till all the vultures had picked their corpses clean and the sun had baked them dry and the wind had scattered their bones around – so that you can’t even tell they were once individuals. Just a valley of dry bones. Even the mention of hope—even the uttering of the word hope—sounds stupid. Like imagining that one day the Twin Towers in New York could stand again.

- What does your faith hang by? A thread, or a sturdy rope?

- Does a message of hope ever strike you as foolish or naïve?

### **Psalm 104:25-35, 37**

A few years ago, I was volunteering at a center for at-risk youth, when a guest speaker spoke to the young people about survival skills. The typical audience for such a talk would be hikers, hunters, and other outdoorsy types, who find themselves in survival situations by choice, or in some cases by happenstance. By contrast, many of the teens around me found themselves fighting to survive every single night, without a warm and safe place to sleep. They hung on his every word.

The most memorable information he gave the group was what he called the Rule of 3's. You can survive for three minutes without air, for three days without water, and for three weeks without food. Our lives are so fragile, as the Valley of Dry Bones scene above demonstrates in Scripture, and as the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrates today. If you are 55 years old, your heart has beaten approximately 2 billion times. But if it doesn't beat that 2-billion-and-first time, that's it for you. And then again. And again. And again.

But somehow it works, the vast majority of the time. No matter how much science you learn, it is baffling that such an untold number of factors would combine favorably to make your life possible every moment and every day. We moderns are so thoroughly educated, we have become easily fooled into thinking that we can understand everything. We know all about the foundation of matter and energy, but we have forgotten about the ground of being. For it is in God that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The "living things too many to number" understand this innately. Do we?

- How long can you hold your breath? Find a quiet place and stopwatch. It's not a competition, so don't hurt yourself. Afterward, use your first breath to thank God for the air in your lungs.
- How can we be "pro-science" while also recognizing the transcendent truths of God?

### **Acts 2:1-21**

Some people claim that Pentecost is the day Christianity was born. If that's true, then the manner of the Holy Spirit's arrival has had a tremendous impact on how we view our faith. If a major part of being a follower of Yeshua is to be "filled" or "baptized" with the Holy Spirit (regardless of one's view on gifts of the Spirit, or a "secondary" experience) then it's easy to give the physical world a back seat. Instead, they'll say that what's truly important is to be "spiritual".

From a modern Western perspective, one might argue that all our places and times are the same. It doesn't matter where you worship God, as long as you worship God. It doesn't matter which day you rest, as long as you take a day to rest. If this were true, then the great outpouring of the Spirit could have happened any place, and any day. But in fact, it happened on a very specific day. So specific, in fact, that the holiday is named accordingly: "Pentecost" is the Greek word for "fiftieth", as in the fiftieth day from Resurrection Sunday. More importantly, it happened right on top of the Jewish festival of Shavuot. (More on that later)

If specific places didn't matter, the outpouring could have happened any old place. But it happened in a very specific place: the Temple. (Not in the Upper Room, as many believe, but close.) The Temple was the place of God's manifest presence, for the benefit of Israel, but also for the world. As Jesus quoted in the Temple-clearing scene: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations." At Pentecost, this potential is fully realized.

Every act of love on God's part is mapped onto something God knows we're ready to understand. Jesus did this with Jewish culture and symbols in mind, and the more we're aware of those, the better we can understand his message. He mapped his bloodshed onto the Passover cup of redemption. He mapped his broken body onto the pure unleavened bread. He mapped his execution onto the slaying of the spotless Passover lamb. And he mapped his resurrection onto the feast of First Fruits, revealing himself to be the first fruits over all creation.

Then, fifty days later, when thousands were gathered at the Temple from every corner of the globe, God mapped the coming of the Holy Spirit onto the Jewish festival of Shavuot, when the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai is commemorated. But this time, instead of God etching laws into stone to birth a nation, the Spirit is writing God's law on the human heart to launch a global body of believers.

- Are there times you treat as "holy?" Times in the day? A day in the week? Seasons, feasts, or fasts throughout the year?
- Are there objects you treat as "holy"? What about your own body?

### **John 15:26-27, 16:4-15**

In my commentary on the passage from Acts, I examined Pentecost as the moment when God's physical presence on earth shifts from the earthly body of Christ to the global Body of Christ. In reality, that moment was ten whole days long.

At my sending parish in Missouri (as in many Episcopal churches), the focal point of our worship space is an altar, and above that altar is a cross. Who's on that cross? Nobody. Historically, of course, it was Jesus on that cross, but where is Jesus now? In that parish, Jesus can be clearly seen above the cross, in a beautiful stained glass tryptic, depicting him ascending into heaven.

Sometimes, I wonder why Jesus had to do that. Why did he have to disappear into the clouds and leave us here without him? His disciples at the time wondered that, too.

But here's the thing about the Incarnation—about God becoming one of us and dying and rising as one of us: It is the most powerful work God could have done to save us. And yet, if Jesus had remained on earth afterward, as a human, he would have been painfully limited. If he'd stayed, God-in-the-flesh could only ever have two eyes, two ears, two hands, two feet.

But here we see the risen and exalted Jesus, calling us into himself – to be his body. His hands and feet. His millions of hands and millions of feet. That’s why we call the church the Body of Christ.

When we die to ourselves (in baptism, in discipleship, in service), we are crucified with Christ. When we are crucified with Christ, we are resurrected with Christ. When we are resurrected with Christ, when we eat his flesh and drink his blood, we abide in him and he abides in us. We are the Body of Christ.

But it didn’t happen in an instant. Jesus ascended to heaven, just like he said he would in the Gospel passage, on the fortieth day after his crucifixion. The Holy Spirit didn’t come down until Pentecost—the fiftieth day. In between, the disciples were instructed to “remain in the city” and wait. To have faith, like Noah building an ark, like Abraham leaving his home, like Moses addressing Pharaoh, in the good gifts that God has in store for those who believe.

- What’s the most audacious thing you’ve ever asked God for? What happened?
- What have you learned from God recently that you couldn’t bear before?

***Ryan Wiksell** was raised Pentecostal/Charismatic, first in Oklahoma, and later in Kansas City. A personal call to ministry led him to study music and theology at Evangel University in Springfield, Mo. Doors were then opened for him to serve in various Southern Baptist churches, as he held positions of music leadership and supporting roles in communications and the arts. Ryan married Christina in 2003, and shortly thereafter they pursued a call to plant a grassroots independent church in downtown Springfield, called The Front Porch. After this effort drew to a close in 2011, they sought out a new spiritual family, which they found in Christ Episcopal Church in Springfield. This parish supported them strongly as they became parents to twins Asher and Anya in 2015, and as they began their seminary journey in 2018. Today, Ryan is seeking full-time ministry opportunities as he prepares to complete his Master of Divinity degree in the Spring of 2021.*