



## Bones and Fire

*TEXT*  
*Ezekiel 37:1–10*  
*Acts 2:1–13*

May 15, 2016 — Pentecost — 8:00 and 10:45 a.m. — Sermon by Rev. Hallie M. Hottle

**R**attling bones and violent winds, tongues of fire and accusations of drunkenness: Today is Pentecost, and it is easily the coolest day of the Christian year.

In my last call, at a church in Miami, Florida, a lot of my week was spent teaching children. We had a pre-K through fifth grade school on our campus, and part of our mission as a Presbyterian school was to teach the Bible and religious education to our kids. And so during the week, I'd meet twice with each class, 250 students, and attempt to teach them something about our faith.

If you ever want to learn the Bible more fully, I wouldn't suggest seminary. I'd suggest a kindergarten classroom with 20 kids and lots of questions.

Pentecost was always one of our last lessons of the school year. It was pretty fantastic timing. With students bouncing off the walls and ready for summer break, in came the Holy Spirit with violent winds and shouts in all languages. We'd sit on the floor and all try to make wind sounds as loud as we could. We'd make our own little pinwheel fans, those things you blow and they spin. And I gave the kids candles, and they would run

around our campus announcing the Holy Spirit was there, which drew looks from most of the staff.

And being located where we were in Miami, in any given class, students would be able to speak a number of languages: Spanish and French, Creole and Portuguese. And so we'd read this story out loud in our native languages, all at once, and end up in a fit of laughter because it's very hard to speak in one language while listening to others.

As I entered my second year of teaching these kids, I realized something had happened during that first Pentecost — because they started to request we do it again. Somewhere between Creation and Advent, my creativity must have been waning, and they got a little bored. So one day, one of my third-graders asked, "Pastor Hallie, can we have Pentecost again?"

And then they began to do something that you learn being around kids really fast. They started to use my own lesson against me. They'd say, "But you *told* us that the Holy Spirit is always with us, so why don't we just celebrate it all the time?"

And that is how I created a bunch of Pentecostal children at a Presbyterian school in Miami.

I think my students were onto something. There's something about Pentecost that speaks to us in a way that not all our biblical narrative does. This is a story you can't just hear and understand. I remember again every year when I start trying to write a sermon for this day that there aren't even great commentary resources. Most scholars seem distracted by what "tongues of fire" really means or why the author uses the word "violent" to describe the wind that filled the house. Not bad angles, but only details in the magnitude of this story.

This is a day children remember and scholars trip over because it's not a day that calls to our *intellect*. The Pentecost story is one that must be *embodied*; that must be felt and heard with our *whole selves*. It must be read in a language that doesn't fall natural to our ears, and be accompanied with wind and too many candles and a little extra red in the worship space.

This day is different than other days. And in today's world, where sound bytes rule and real conversation is difficult to find, where we are bloated with entertainment and starving for spiritual sustenance, we need a *Pentecost*. We need flame and wind to rush over us. We need

to be embodied by the Spirit and thrown into the street. We need something real and tangible and spirit-filled to grab us.

When the parent of one of my young students told me he had come home raving about Pentecost, because he got to run around and light things on fire, I worried for a moment. But he was naming a deep truth of who we are. He likes this day best because it required *all of him* — not just his head, not even just his heart, but his entire being was engaged. For there is no command to *sit still* when the Holy Spirit enters the room.

I think more often than not, we need to listen to the youngest among us. I think we need more Pentecost.

The young adults of our country have riled everyone up in recent years by saying on national surveys that they are “spiritual, but not religious.” Faith leaders and churches have taken offense. Countless articles have been written about what this means for the future of the Church.

But I think our young adults are pointing to a reality of our soul’s needs. And I think if our churches are offended, they’re reading the story of Pentecost all wrong. Like the little guy who told me he likes Pentecost best because he gets to run around with fire, our young adults are reaching for something that feels real and tangible and life-giving.

Perhaps all of us feel this way, but our tradition-bucking young people are the ones unafraid to say it. We’re looking for something more than heady les-

sons and infighting about issues that seem to ignore the reality of who people really are. We’re tired of hearing about “religious freedom” laws that revoke our humanity and shrink our God.

We don’t want to *contemplate* the tongues of fire. We want to *feel* them — to be ignited again by Christ’s call to change the world. We want to know that our daily life isn’t separate and distinct from our faith life — to feel our whole selves being pulled upon to stumble from our safe places and preach the word in every language — in teacher language; in technology’s language; in the language of nursing and finance and Royals baseball; in the language of our youngest children and seeking adults and wondering young people.

We want something Spiritual; literally, something “of the Spirit.” We want wind and fire and to be filled again.

Every year we come to this day of Pentecost. And perhaps we just all need to be put into kindergarten classrooms. Maybe we need candles and pinwheels and broken rules to send us out and remind us how this whole thing was started. It wasn’t with well-written doctrines and rules and lines that separated. It was with a wind and fire that pushed people together, into the streets, to hear Good News in all languages.

It was in one of our laughing-fit, spirit-filled moments of teaching this Pentecost story that one of our second-graders remarked, “This is like that other story! The one with all the bones!” She was speaking

of Ezekiel and this story we had learned months earlier.

I realized as she said it that I had taught these stories similarly. When we learned this story from Ezekiel, we sat on the floor. We made wind sounds and stomped to sound like rattling. We found sticks and banged them together. The goofiest kids of each class inevitably would lay all the way down and tried to reenact what it must look like for bones to shake and stand again. And that lesson ended in a very similar laughing fit.

And ever since that second-grader’s realized connection, I’ve found it hard to speak of Pentecost without also hearing the rattling bones of Ezekiel. For the Holy Spirit was not born on this day. It has always existed through our faith history, since that first moment when she swept across the face of the deep and separated light from darkness; since that first moment when she entered the earth creature’s nostrils and called him to live; in the Israelite’s exodus and the prophets’ calls.

The Holy Spirit has always been the instigator, the change agent, the whisper in our faith family story that says something new is about to happen — the life-giver; the prophet-caller; the fire-starter and bone-rattler.

And in this world that needs some change — where souls need feeding and flames need reviving — I think we could do well with a little more Pentecost.

I was at dinner with some young adults a couple of weeks ago, and we began talking about the Holy Spirit — because wine

and fried pickles do that sometimes. One of them remarked he doesn't think much about the Holy Spirit. God as Father and as Son, yes, but the Holy Spirit is used by too many people as a reason to speak in tongues and pretend that they can heal each other. It reminded him of those crazy preachers on TV that are currently *gaining* in ratings who sell "end of the world preparedness buckets" and believe they can see visions of wealth for those who send them money. So as this young man said, he'd rather just stay away from it. Perhaps at some point the Spirit was too co-opted by snake tamers and soothsayers for more moderate thinkers to claim.

Perhaps it started back in the year 325, when we couldn't decide if the Spirit came from the Father or from the Father *and* the Son, and so we fought about it for 600 years and then all got mad and said we wouldn't play with each other anymore, dividing the Church between East and West.

Or maybe it came later as we settled this country. And while we generally decided the decimation of native people and slavery were OK, we entertained our piety by arguing about how much revivalism was appropriate, a debate about Spirit-preaching vs. order and decency, and split ourselves old school and new school, a line that still haunts our denomination.

Or maybe it's been more recently. As the young man pointed to, perhaps our mainline un-ease with anything that the religious right does has caused us to turn away from the entire thing,

throwing out the Spirit with the rest of the ugly bathwater.

I don't specifically know what it is. We have a complicated history with this third piece of the Trinity that cannot be completely understood or channeled or controlled. The thing that breathed life into us is always going to be confounding to the creatures who received the breath.

But just as I know it is difficult for us, especially as Presbyterians in 2016, I also know that we need it. We need to be caught on fire again.

This is not the day the Holy Spirit was born, but it is the day it gave birth to the Church. And like most children, we reach points where we scoff and look away and try to deny where we came from. We've pulled away from language of the Spirit and opted for more pragmatic explanations and predictable plans.

But as the Spirit has done throughout our history, she will rekindle, revive, reshape, reform us yet again. We need the breath and fire and rattling bones. Our children need to be given candles and taught that God wants them to run and be themselves and loves them while they do it. Our young adults need to be shown that bones can live again, that prophetic speech has more power than political sound bytes, and that the Spirit is still alive and wanting to ignite them in their plans to change the world.

We need a Pentecost.

And friends, I have heard the bones begin to rattle. I've seen our oldest members dance in worship at the Gathering.

I've seen young adults cry in prayer that finally touches the starving places in their hearts. I've witnessed a session speak of moving into a future while listening for God to tell them which way. Shoot, I've even seen people speak in different languages, but dance in the same language to merengue music while eating Bar-B-Q in Kansas, just two nights ago! And I've seen all these things in the short five months I've been part of this church.

If I look back on all the sermons I've preached and search for a continuous thread throughout them, it is that we need more Spirit. We need a revival of wind and flame to ignite the Church again. And I've become repetitive in this through every place I've preached. But this is the first place I've been that might be able to hear the bones begin to dance. You are one of few churches in this country that is not backing away from the movement of the Spirit.

But the responsibility that comes with being on fire is enormous. Village Church, the Spirit is here.

You have been thrown outside the house and called to sell coffee and host artists and make music, and you're doing this, whether you know it or not, in order to preach in languages that people can understand.

*[And Gathering people, don't tell the rest of the church I'm telling you this. But I have found the Spirit to be burning most brightly in this space. You are worshiping in new ways, in order that all people can understand.]*

And some have scoffed and assumed you were drunk on wealth and size and can't understand the plight of most churches in our country. And so, in this next era of being Village, in this next era of being The Church, the work here will be to continue to respond to the Spirit, but more importantly, to help spread the fire — to ensure that the flames continue to move beyond this place into the world in such a way that everyone can become engulfed in the Spirit.

God has named that these bones can live again. The winds are coming to bring them back to life. But God commanded Ezekiel to tell the winds what to do. The Spirit relies on the prophetic voice to make new life happen. You must be the prophetic voice, and the speakers in the city square, and the workers in the community. You must be willing to change and fill and be filled.

I don't know what these dancing bones are going to look like. We never do. But I can hear them begin to move. I pray we use some prophetic imagination in this next chapter together to ensure that all who crave the Spirit will find her, so that we can grow — not in numbers or in wealth, but in ability to feed the spiritual malnourishment of our land in brightness, so that all who seek the Spirit will find her burning here.

Friends, we need a Pentecost. I have felt this fire here — this fire that first called me to ministry and pushed me into the Church. Let's share it. Let's run around with some candles and see what we can light on fire.

*Spirit God, ignite us. Light the things that feel dormant in our hearts. Awaken our ears to hear new life, and give us voices to proclaim it in ways your people can hear, that all our souls may be fed by you again. Amen.*

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.