

Sermon Title: Only Beginnings
Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Romans 8:22-27
© The Rev. Dr. Charles Valenti-Hein

June 4, 2006
Memorial Presbyterian Church, Appleton, WI
Pentecost Sunday/Graduate Recognition

One part of the conversation in my last gathering for the Pastor Theologian program centered on what it meant to be “called by God,” and specifically, what it might mean that the witness of the bible seems to be that Israel at the very least *was*, and you can make a pretty good argument from Paul, it still *is*, God’s *Chosen* People.

The conversation was directed by Gary Anderson, who teaches Old Testament Studies at Notre Dame, and has an interesting personal journey, having grown up in the United Church of Christ, but found his adult home within the Roman Catholic traditions. Note that all who gathered around that table had at one point or another in their lives been ordained to ministry, and in each of our traditions that meant that we had been guided to that point within a language system in which “calling” and being “chosen” were central images. We were there because in some significant way we at some point in our life’s journey had understood ourselves to have been called by God, and that call had been affirmed by a community that, in response, ordained us to our life’s works.

It’s a danger of that particular language system that you can begin to think that, by virtue of your having been “called” you must in some way be a pretty special person, and so deserving of some sort of special benefits, or honors, from the one who had called you. The down side of being “called” and “ordained” is that you can begin to think that there are certain things to which you must be entitled, and benefits or gifts that will come your way by virtue of who you are. But one of the things that Professor Anderson did was take us on a brief guided tour of some of the earlier chapters of the biblical witness—the books our Jewish friends would call Torah, or the Books of the Law—and the stories of those who were *called* by God in the context of that narrative. We looked at Abraham, and Isaac, Jacob, and Esau, Joseph, and Moses. And two very interesting themes emerged.

The first is the observation that *God’s* election more often than not flies in the face of, and in fact subverts, the norms and traditions of the culture of the very nation God seems intent on calling his own, and finds no particular basis in the virtue of the one who happens to be favored by God’s call. Think about those names, and the stories attached to them—Abraham, and Joseph, and Moses, and you could, indeed, keep going on through King David, and Isaiah, and Peter and Paul. In no case does God seek out the candidate with the best qualifications, the recognized gifts, the public acclaim, but more often than not the exact opposite—the one whom, as we listen you can’t help but wonder if God’s not made some sort of mistake here—to be the Chosen One. Fact number one.

The second observation is that “election” in the biblical story does not mean, “you’re so special and precious that I’m going to set you on the side and keep you for good.” Election, as Ann La Mott, has suggested, does not involve straw hats, but crash helmets. Being called by God not only doesn’t mean that you are in some way intrinsically better than the rest, it means that there is some hard, perhaps even nasty work that needs to get done, and *you* are the one to do it.

It's this second quality of election that danced in my mind as I thought about our reading this morning from Ezekiel. We've made something of a child's game out of this familiar text—a happy little ditty, of foot bone connected to the ankle bone—but if you allow the text to speak for itself there's no escaping the stark grimness of the reality. Ezekiel, led by the Spirit of the Lord, is brought to the middle of a valley which, so we must surmise, was the site of one of the Babylonian routs of the Jewish army. Thousands had responded to God's call, and given their lives in defense of God's Chosen People on an unnoted day, and their anonymous bones had been bleached by the sun. It's was Ezekiel's *calling* to make his way out into that desolate valley to ponder the power and possibility of that God.

My mind drifted to an image I'd seen of the new Pope Benedict XVI, who just before our Memorial Day had made his way to what I imagine is the closest thing in our modern world to that valley of dry bones: the desolate remains of the death camp constructed by the same Nazis who had conscripted a young Joseph Ratzinger in their slow, methodical and insidious march to make of Germany the "Third Reich"—the *new* Chosen People. Benedict, the reports indicate, insisted on walking in *that* valley of dry bones and heaving spirits by himself, instead of being chauffeured about in the car that had been prepared; an appropriate appreciation of his unique calling. This was not a photo opportunity on a publicity tour, but an opportunity to prayerfully consider the hideous potential that lurks in the human soul. And though it didn't get a great deal of play in the American media, the BBC reported that at the end of his short walk, the Pope quietly reflected, "In a place like this, words fail. In the end, there can only be a dread silence - a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this?"

Now, if this were all that there was to it—if the story of Ezekiel's visit to the valley ended with the second verse, if the wizened former Nazi youth, now head of a huge swath of Christendom had quietly closed the car door and gone on to the next engagement—this would be a sad bit of business indeed. But it's not. And it was in that story of the Pope's visit to what is as close as we might come in the last century to the heart of darkness that I began to hear what Ezekiel must have felt as the stirring of that same Spirit we celebrate on this Pentecost Sunday.

It was as he stood at the decrepit remains of the crematoria at Birkenau that Benedict uttered a short prayer, not in Latin for the church, or in Italian for the hierarchy, or in Polish, for the media, but in his native German tongue—an intensely personal and private prayer.

"Lord, you are the God of Peace, you are Peace: a heart that seeks conflict will not understand you. A mind that is oriented towards violence cannot comprehend you.

"Grant to all those who live in harmony that they may continue to live in peace, and grant to those who are divided the gift of reconciliation."

This, it seems to me, is true Christian calling: to stand in the most unlikely of spots, and instead of bowing to the unremitting horrors the past might offer, to claim, instead, new possibilities, new promises, new hope. That's what Ezekiel did, with the Spirit's urging. Can these bones live? Not likely. And I will personally guarantee that it was not on account of any gifts, or abilities, or tricks that Ezekiel brought to that forsaken place that the story unfolds as it did. It's because he was willing to utter a preposterous possibility that those bones started to rattle and

shake. It's not because *Ezekiel* spoke, but because the Lord who created them commanded the four winds, that those silent cyborgs became once again living creatures.

Paul understood, as he wrote to the church in Rome—a community that was struggling to come to terms with its own identity in an environment that was increasingly hostile to the message it brought. The calling of the Christian in a world in transition is not to wring your hands and despair at what's happened, or to lament how meager your gifts are in the face of such insurmountable challenges. It's not the calling of the Christian to name everyone else's sins while hiding or justifying your own. The calling of the Christian in the midst of a world that may well be collapsing around you is to listen for the infant's cry. It is to hope for the possibilities that have been lost in what every other eye sees only as a valley of dry bones. It is to kneel in prayer, where others might mock a god who was absent, and pray to a God whose name is Peace.

It wasn't at that same morning conversation, but it was probably as we sat on the porch of the conference center after one of the wonderful meals we shared, that several of us reflected on what should be obvious, that whether deserving or not, we—and it was the *imperial* we, and not the *royal* we that was intended (all of us, together!)—are unmistakably and overwhelmingly blessed. We live in the richest nation on the face of the earth. We have congregations that support us, families that love us, wonderful educations. We are blest. Period, end of sentence. But doesn't that (so the Calvinists among us mused) mean that we are also in some important way *called* and *elect*, as well? Isn't it true that God has given us all this bounty, not because we are somehow worthy or deserving of it, but because in some way, in our own small worlds, God just might need an Ezekiel, or a Paul, or a Benedict, to let a little of that light shine which we will never in our wildest dreams kindle, but can only reflect?

A few minutes ago we recognized some pretty amazing young people, who've accomplished many things in the brief time they've had on this good earth. We are justifiably proud of them, as they have finished one important leg on their life's journeys, and now eagerly await the next stage. Indulge me for just a moment while I speak directly to them. You can listen in if you want, and there just might be something in it for you, as well.

First of all, congratulations. I'm not kidding when I say that the classes, and information, and ideas that you've mastered in order to earn the honors and recognitions that you'll enjoy in these weeks of graduation far exceed anything that was required of me in order to stand where you now stand. I'm not entirely sure, as I've witnessed the rigors of your education, that I would have made it out of my Sophomore year! You've done very well, and you should be very proud.

But before it all goes to your head, can I invite you to wonder just why it is that all this wonderful opportunity has been extended to *you*? Why did *you* get to wake up each morning in Appleton, Wisconsin instead of Basra, Iraq? Why have you been blessed by friends, and opportunities, and though I'm sure there are times when you've wished there was *more*, incredible wealth? You see this time in your life, that feels so much like an ending, is really just a beginning. It was one far wiser than I who said, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (Luke 12:48).

Who knows what, exactly, that will mean in any of our lives. One of the lessons of this day of Pentecost is that the movement of the Spirit is founded in a logic that transcends our human knowing. The only conclusion you can really draw, after an honest accounting of our unaccountable blessing, is that in some way, shape, or form the call of God *will* come, be it to a desert valley, or the iron bars of a profound injustice, or to the side of one who needs some healing touch, or just a friend who believes in them more than they can believe in themselves. My prayer is that when that call comes, we'll be ready to turn in straw hats for crash helmets, and we'll find the courage, or gumption, or whatever it takes to shout out to that valley of dry bones, or kneel in prayer at the vortex of life's horror, not so that the world will respond to our call, but that through us, the work of God's Spirit might be done.

Let us pray.