

New Life!

Trinity Sunday

MAY 26
9:30AM

Sunday, May 26, 2024 | Trinity Sunday
“New Life!” | Ezekiel 37:1-14 | Charlie Berthoud

Hello Covenant! I’ve been on sabbatical and study leave for six weeks, and it’s good to be back. If you’ve started worshipping here in the past six weeks, hello! My name is Charlie!

For my first sermon since Easter Sunday, March 31, I chose a reading from the book of Ezekiel—one of the most curious and challenging books in the Bible. Ezekiel has a series of dramatic visions and engages in some bizarre prophetic street theater, all of which are meant to help the people hear from God to understand their suffering and find hope.

This reading from Ezekiel 37 is actually one of the readings for **Pentecost**, the day when we celebrate the power and presence of God’s spirit. Those of you who pay close attention to the liturgical calendar will know that last Sunday was Pentecost. Last Sunday was our wonderful children’s musical, so we didn’t focus a lot on the Holy Spirit or Pentecost.

However, the power and presence of God’s Spirit isn’t limited to one Sunday—even for us Presbyterians! So today we recognize and maybe even open ourselves to the Holy Spirit.

And since today is actually **Trinity** Sunday—the day that we remember that our God is one God in three persons—it’s very appropriate for us Presbyterians to reflect on the Spirit.

The Trinity, the belief of one God in three persons, traditionally understood to be Father Son Holy Spirit. But there are many alternatives:

Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer
Source, Word, Storm

That final trinitarian imagery comes from our opening hymn today, “Source and Sovereign, Rock and Cloud,” #11 in our hymnal. It’s worth pondering to learn more about God.

Trinity Sunday is a good day to remember that we can’t put God in a box, that God is bigger than our imagination and our vocabulary. And it’s a good day to be open to the surprising things that God can do, particularly thru the Spirit.

Before we get to the reading from Ezekiel, I want to think big picture for a bit.

On this day of thinking in threes, I want to share with you a general three-fold pattern in the Bible and in the life of faith. This pattern is articulated by Walter Brueggemann (*The Message of the Psalms*) who classifies the psalms in three types.

Orientation, disorientation, new orientation.


With orientation, we celebrate the gift of life, we’re stable and content. Things are good.

Inevitably, things get complicated or difficult. This is disorientation.

The challenge and opportunity is the third part, when we can journey through the complications and difficulties to find new perspective, new purpose, and new peace. This is new orientation.

We see these three stages in the first book of the Bible, with creation and the Garden of Eden, followed by the exile from the garden and the chaos that led to the flood, followed by Noah and his family and the animals having a new beginning, with the sign of the rainbow as a covenant promise.

Orientation	Disorientation	New Orientation
Eden	Flood	Rainbow
Blessed	Slaves	Exodus
Life	Death	Resurrection



We see this pattern continue in Genesis and Exodus. Genesis 12 tells us that Abraham and Sarah will be blessed with descendants, so that they can be a blessing to others. Blessed to be a blessing. That goes well for a while, but eventually the people end up enslaved in Egypt. But then God calls Moses who leads them out of slavery, out of bondage, out of despair, and to

the promised land, a new start, a new orientation.

We see this pattern simply and profoundly in Jesus Christ, in his life, death, and resurrection.

Parents sometimes see the pattern in their children: the joy of birth, the disorientation and challenge of growing up, especially the teenage years, and the new orientation of seeing your baby become an adult. We're seeing some of that new orientation in our 23- and 21-year-old sons!

The pattern plays out over and over in life—teenagers go through it all the time. Adults do too, with work, with family, with relationships, with health, with finances, and more.

You have a good start and all is going smoothly. Something goes wrong; maybe it's your fault or maybe it's beyond your control. Then you get a second chance, a new beginning, or at least new perspective on the challenging situation.

Orientation—disorientation—new orientation.

On my sabbatical I was reminded of how I experienced this 20 years ago. I was in Pittsburgh, and a 43-year-old well-loved man died suddenly in a tree cutting accident. He came from a big family, and a family that owns a huge steel construction company. I spent a lot of time with the family, especially with one of his sisters, Darlaine. The family built a bridge on a local hiking trail in his memory, just down the road from church.

A few years after JR died, that my brother John died, suddenly and unexpectedly at age 45. He was my best friend. I went from orientation to the depths of disorientation when I got the news.

People were wonderfully supportive at that time, and none was more supportive than Darlaine, who by that time had moved into new orientation, still processing her grief, as she comforted other people in grief. I'm glad I got to see her in Pittsburgh.

As people of faith, we need to help each other in the disorientation times and find ways to move toward the new orientation.

Back to Ezekiel. We see the orientation/disorientation/new-orientation pattern through the story of Ezekiel, especially the second and third stages.

The people have settled into the land and built a temple. Life is good. Orientation.

However, the people have wandered and forgotten about God. They have tolerated injustice, they have worshipped the wrong things, they have become indifferent to human suffering. So this leads to exile, disorientation.

The bulk of the book of Ezekiel is about disorientation. The exile happened over several years, and after it began Ezekiel pleaded with the people to turn from their idolatry, selfishness, and indifference. But his pleas were in vain, as the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of the people continued.

Chapters 1-24 are filled with warnings about coming destruction, calls to change, and then the painful reality of that destruction.

And chapters 25-33 focus on other nations, who were greedy, selfish, and violent. The fall of Israel wasn't just the fault of Israel.

Remember: the problems or disorientation we face in life are sometimes our own fault, and sometimes they're caused by circumstances beyond our control.

Late in chapter 33, Ezekiel gets the news that Jerusalem has fallen to the Babylonians. The people of Israel are either dead or in exile, far from their home.

Exile is hard for us to imagine. Let's ponder for a minute. What if people from Minnesota or Canada came and destroyed our homes and our churches and our capitol building, and led us to live elsewhere? It would be horrible.

Yes it's a silly example, and fortunately the people of Canada and Minnesota are wonderful, but maybe it helps us think about what the pain of exile would be. Being forced from your home, from the land your love, from the sacred places would be devastating and leave us feeling doomed.

In this situation of despair and total disorientation, in chapters 34 to 48 of this very strange book, **we hear a message of hope. A message of new orientation.**

Ezekiel talks about how God will raise up a new leader, a new David, a new shepherd for the flock, to guide the people into a new future.

“But I will rescue my flock so that they will never again be prey.... I will appoint for them a single shepherd, and he will feed them.... The trees in the field will bear fruit, and the earth will yield its harvest. They will be safe on their fertile land, and they will know that I am the LORD when I break the bars of their yoke and deliver them from those who enslaved them.” -Ezekiel 34:22-27 (CEB)

Ezekiel talks about how God will give the people a new heart, not a heart of stone, but a heart of flesh.

“I will sprinkle clean water upon you... and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.” -Ezekiel 36:25-27 (NRSV)

And, in our reading for today (finally!) God brings new life from a place of death. To help understand this reading, I want to share three more items with you:

- In Hebrew, the word for breath, spirit, and wind is the same: ruach. And ruach appears ten times in this account.
- In the creation story of Genesis, God breathes into the dirt, bringing life from the dirt. In this reading listen for how God’s breath brings new life.
- Christian faith is built on resurrection hope, the new life of Jesus, the new hope of God’s people.

Listen for God’s word from Ezekiel 37:

The hand of the Lord came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the Lord and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on

you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.” So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.” I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act,” says the Lord.

Thanks be got God for the words of scripture.

Before my six-week sabbatical and study leave, I needed to provide a theme, a scripture reading, and a topic for this worship service today. I figured that “new life” would be a good focus, that I would hopefully be experiencing some new life during my sabbatical. So I put “new life” down as my sermon title, and left for sabbatical. But as I pondered the valley of the dry bones and studied this passage, my thinking expanded. This isn’t just about God giving new life to one person, like a pastor on a sabbatical, or Ezekiel, or a king or priest. Instead Ezekiel 37 is about God giving new life to a people, the people of Israel, the entire community.

The valley was filled with bones. “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel.” God didn’t tell Ezekiel to take a six-week break and come back refreshed. God didn’t choose just a few bones to reanimate. God called the entire community to new life. Too often in our world, we individualize faith and think it’s just about ourselves. Too often in the world we are isolated and alone. Covid didn’t help. Too often we think we have to just pull ourselves up by our bootstraps.

Rev. Otis Moss spoke powerfully about this at a conference I attended. He stressed the

point that liberation is a community exercise, not individual. “We’re on the same team” was his message.

We are called to faith in community, to a sense of togetherness, to a sense of interdependence—one body with many parts.

Sometimes we help other people, and sometimes those people help us.

I learned this anew during sabbatical, stepping back from things and then seeing how smoothly everything went. Thank you, Jess, Megan, Melissa, the staff, the leaders.

During April, people in this church heard sermons on the book of Acts and were invited to read the book of Acts—the book which tells of the formation of the early church, how people came together after the life death and resurrection of Jesus to seek and experience and grow in and share new life.

The early church models this collective faith, this collaborative effort to welcome the new life.

As I pondered this idea of collective faith, I find myself thankful for Covenant, thankful for the ways we’re collectively trying to welcome the new life that God gives us.

- We see new life with the pageant last week, with all the kids proclaiming the good news of faith, with songs, scripture, and fun
- We see it a few weeks ago with 10 youth being confirmed
- We see it with several people in this congregation who have felt called by God and are taking seminary classes and preaching here and at other area churches, building up the broader community of faith
- We see it in small groups and classes and book studies, as people take a posture of learning and growing together, and in the process caring for each other
- We see new life in our Guatemala partnership and our Glenn Stephens Elementary School partnership, and in many other ways
- We don’t see it but we know it happens behind the scenes, as people write notes, visit, pray, call, and care for each other in hard times.

In all these ways and more, we are letting the spirit of the living God surround us and

strengthen us and bring us back to life.

Together, we are welcoming the new life God offers us.

Together, we're figuring out what it means to follow Jesus, the one who came proclaiming God's kingdom, saying "I am the resurrection and the life", and calling people to new purpose.

Together we're helping each other move from disorientation to new orientation, as we learn and live God's love with each other.

Let us pray.

Thank you God for the promise and gift of new life. Let your Spirit blow through us and around us—to inspire and encourage and challenge us, and renew us. Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us. Open our eyes to people who are in a valley of dry bones or stuck in disorientation. Grant us wisdom, grant us courage for the living of these days, as your beloved children, as disciples of Jesus, and as people filled with your Spirit of faith, hope, and love. Amen.