

First Fifteen: May 30 – June 3
Focus Scripture: Acts 2:1-21

Monday: Genesis 11:1-9

Going Deeper: This story from Genesis is referred to as “the tower of Babel.” Although this story is about the scattering of people whereas the Day of Pentecost which is recorded in Acts 2 is often seen as a gathering of people, the Day of Pentecost is not necessarily a corrective or response to Babel. It is true some understand these two linguistic stories within our faith tradition as being connected, and it does no harm to make this connection as long as we do not miss the meaning and teaching of the story of Babel. As you read these verses what stands out as God’s concern? What can be overlooked and must be known about the story of Babel is that it follows the story of Noah and is itself directly followed by the call of Abram. Human disunity and mistrust of one another is not God’s desire for us. What I hear within the teaching of the tower of Babel is the message of our human resistance to surrender, or submission to follow God’s leading, and to accept our place as those who are created from God’s benevolence. This story may be understood as a critique of our human hubris. Although I do not believe the story of Babel is an attempt to diminish our desire to compete and excel, what I do suspect is the message of the story of Babel is a critique to do so without regard to the origin of our creative desire and potential. I see this from the message found in Genesis 11:5 *“Then the LORD came down to see the city and the tower that the humans had built.”* ((CEB) These words tell us, even as or when we reach our greatest achievements, they do not match the wonder of God’s creation. These words from Genesis 11:5 tells us even as we reach our highest moment, or our most profound achievements God comes down to us. This story calls us to understand just how amazing and blessed we are, but even as we attempt to touch the stars, we do not quite reach the heavens.

Prayer: All loving and almighty God help me this day to see my potential, abilities, and accomplishments as your gift to me. Then Lord, open my mind and heart to see these same gifts in those I meet and work with today. Amen,

Tuesday: Ezekiel 37:1-14

Going Deeper: Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones reminds us of God’s desire for restoration, and revitalization. They display this by using vivid imagery whose message is a symbolic reminder that we are more than “flesh and bone.” In Ezekiel’s vision he realizes these once dry bones are so no longer. They have been restored, but something is missing... *“Sinews formed, then muscles on the bones, then skin stretched over them. But they had no breath in them.”* (Ezekiel 37:8 – the Message) They lacked the breath of life; the Spirit of life was missing. These words of the prophet share a hard truth; we can live our lives without Spirit, without a connection to the life of God that flows from the within and around us. In doing so we may find ourselves dry and worn so thin the vibrancy of life appears to be absent in our lives. These words of the prophet point us to our experience of Pentecost. It is more than a celebration, or remembrance, Pentecost

is an experience of the gift of God's breath of life, God's Spirit of hope and God's call to embrace life with all its joys and challenges. The question God asked of Ezekiel is one we must also explore... *"Child of God, can these bones live?"* When our hope has been worn thin, when we find ourselves weary all the way to the bone, does our faith allow us to believe in ourselves, our church and most importantly our God who is the breath of life tells us *"I will put my breath in you, and you will live. I will plant you on fertile land, and you will know that I am the LORD."* (Ezekiel 37:14 – CEB) As we continue to push against the unsettling news and difficult choices how we answer this question will change everything.

Prayer: Lord of life, our source of hope and the foundation of light even in our deepest darkness... I will trust you, your love, and your presence to guide me. Breathe your breath of life into me, fill my heart with your Spirit and guide my thoughts and actions so what I do is in response to your life-giving Spirit. Amen.

Wednesday: Isaiah 40:3-11

Going Deeper: We typically read these words from Isaiah 40 during the first weeks of Advent as a reflection of the message and ministry of John the Baptist. If we remove them from that context, what do you hear as you read them? What message rises for you, what images grab your attention, what do you feel in your spirit? There is a definite movement and flow in these verses as they move from a message of God's presence through the leveling of the obstacles and challenges, to the awareness of our place before God's enduring word, then to a message of hope as we are called to rise, lifting our voices and our hopes without fear. In Isaiah 40:7 we again encounter *"the breath of the LORD"*, this phrase and verse become what I consider to be the counterbalancing message of this proclamation... It is again the breath of God which brings life and as in this case allows for life to follow its course to the end, a fading, dimming, and diminishing; but it is not the end nor is it meant to be as we are reminded yet again of God's tender love and kindness in Isaiah 40:11 *"Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock; God will gather lambs in his arms and lift them onto his lap. God will gently guide the nursing ewes."* (CEB) These words affirm our lives, not merely at their highest point, but also in the moments of doubt, vulnerability and wandering. They remind us no matter where life finds us, we are never far from God's heart.

Prayer: Our God who levels and lifts guide me through the valleys and help me ascend the hills I must climb. Lord give me the strength to keep going forward, the faith to trust I am on the path you have given me to follow and the courage to be honest when I have strayed. Amen.

Thursday: Isaiah 40:25-31

Going Deeper: Isaiah 40:12-24 continue to describe the divine grandeur of God, often in ways that might be perceived as off-putting, but that is not the prophet's intent. His intent is to elevate our understanding of God, seeking to describe the majesty of God through descending comparison revealing the divine nature within the fabric of all our lives. In Isaiah 40:25 the prophet asks rhetorically, *"To whom then will you compare me,*

or who is my equal? Says the Holy One.” (NRSV) This challenge leads to an invitation to open our eyes, minds, hearts, and senses as it is described in Isaiah 40:26-31. Our lives are not insignificant to God, nor is God unaware of our needs, both the obvious and those we hide. The closing words of this chapter are a call to hope, they challenge us to believe, and to embrace an enduring trust in God’s presence and Spirit will continually provide us what will be needed. We are reminded whereas our resources may be limited, God’s provision is not. These are important truths that become the foundation for the choices we make from day to day. Our faith is not merely ideas and thoughts about God, our faith is how we engage what we know about God, and by allowing our experience of God’s lovingkindness to influence, shape, and transform our lives. “Those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will fly up on the wings of eagles; they will run and not be tired; they will walk and not be weary.” (Isaiah 40:31 – CEB) And I would add they will grow in faith and courage to face and overcome the challenges of our day!

Prayer: Gracious Lord and Savior... restore my hope, grant me patience, embolden my faith, and lead me this day as I seek to share your love, grace, truth, and presence throughout my day. Amen.

Friday: John 20:19-23

Going Deeper: Do we really have that much power? Does God determine whose sins will be forgiven and whose sins will not be forgiven based upon our decision to do so? The answer to these questions is no. Although I am very much aware we do have the power to choose to hold onto the sins of another for various reason... possibly to punish them, or to enact some sort of response of repentance from those who have wronged us; and in doing so I am also aware the harm done impacts us as well as the one from whom we seek repentance. So, what did Jesus mean when he shared this message of empowerment with his disciples? I believe to fully understand what Jesus was sharing with us we must consider his words from John 20:21-22 *“Peace be with you! Just as the Father sent me, I am sending you. And with that he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit.”* (NIV) This message from Jesus is a commissioning of his followers to continue his work to share the message of the kingdom of God and it’s transformative and healing power for all! Jesus breathed upon them, he clearly understood this as an image of the “breath of God” as he shared with them the Holy Spirit. I believe Jesus was challenging them to receive God’s life giving, empowering Spirit to help lead them in this work for themselves and others. To be truly honest, because he knew unless we know and experience forgiveness, and healing restorative love of God, we are not in a place to truly let go of the sins of another, meaning we hold onto them. And in holding on to or retaining the sins of another we break the cycle of grace not just for ourselves, but for all or any whom God has led us to as his messenger of grace.

Prayer: Lord help me remember your grace that has been given to me, most especially in those moments when I find myself in conflict with others. Help me take to heart your prayer for us...

remembering your forgiveness so I may then also share your mercy and forgiveness with and for others. Amen.