

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany ~ Year A
January 20, 2008, 10:30 AM Service
Laura P. Barnes, 50th Anniversary Committee, Co-chair

“Ascension’s 50th Anniversary & Celebration”

Last November, Janice Kell and I, as co-chairs of the 50th anniversary met with Father Howard to review and critique the 50th anniversary celebration. At that time, Father Howard suggested that one of us do a sermon in January- providing closure to this time of celebration and renewal. I, by default, was to be the “one.” My first response was “you must be kidding!” My second response was that I was afraid that when you saw my name by “sermon,” you would get up and leave--- thank you for not doing that!!

So, on behalf of Janice and me, I would like to package our 50th year for you as we look forward to the future. We deviated from the designated readings today to look at Ezekiel’s dry bones. Ezekiel 37:11, “Our bones are dry, our hope has gone, we are done for.”

Joyce Rupp, a spiritual author of numerous books and articles and a Roman Catholic nun, writes about dry bones in her book, *May I Have This Dance?* She begins with a poem:

Tiredness grounds me
Into a quiet stupor
Of the spirit.
I yearn to be inspired,
To be lifted up, set free
Beyond the place of deadness.
The struggle goes on,
However,
And you and I , God
We exist together
With seemingly
Little communion.
Yet, in the deepest part of me
I believe in you,
Perhaps more strongly than ever.

I am learning you
As a God of silence,
Of darkness, deep and strong.
I do not wrestle anymore,
Only wait, only wait,
For you to bring my dry bones
Into dancing once again.

Joyce Rupp believes that “dry bones” feelings happen in most people’s lives at one time or another. It is a time when we feel like we have “run out of gas, we are lifeless, weary. Dry bones feelings can lead to a long road of discouragement or lost enthusiasm. We just drag along, without much inner hope or joy. We may become very self-absorbed or self-centered.”

At any time we feel this deadness, we are like those heaps of dry bones. Ezekiel describes them as “completely dry.” They had no flesh, no muscle, no skin to hold them together, no breath to give them life. Joyce Rupp says, “at times in our deadness of spirit, a truth, may be trying to break through for us. We need to stay with the experience and not run from it. The dry bones feeling may be our inner self’s way of calling us to greater wholeness. It may be saying to us: Look. Pay attention. See what you have ignored so long. Stop running away from this reality that blocks your growth. If you want to have greater freedom you need to claim this part of yourself.” Rupp says, “our true self calls: Now, now is the time. You can no longer afford to ignore this part of yourself. Take the anger, the hurt, the pain. Send it on its way. Make room for more of your goodness to grow in you.”

Dr. Donde Plowman, from the University of Tennessee, spoke to the Parish Hall class this of the Holy Spirit, underwent a radical transformation as breath came into their church.

I think that we did that during our 50th year. I believe Church of the Ascension was in a dry bones period with discouragement, hurt, pain, anger, and decreased hope. And then, as God commands Ezekiel to say, “come from the four winds, breath: breathe in these dead, so that they come to life! And breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet.” So it happened with our church in our celebration of our 50th anniversary.

Now all of the changes cannot be attributed to the 50th anniversary steering committee. We cannot, although we might like to... take credit for the addition of Father Howard, Amy, Father Harry, or Caroline. We cannot take credit for the leadership of the wardens, Tom Ladd and Mary LeMense. But, I believe the hope and initial breath of life did come from the plans for the 50th anniversary and that began with Janice Kell. Her idea—a year of celebration to give our parish focus and hope at a time of struggle and, at times, sadness

and pain. Janice started pulling “our bones” together.

Breath began coming into our dry bones when, in mid 2006, a committed steering committee of 18 parishioners came together, with full vestry approval and support, to plan the 50th anniversary year. For the next 18 months, these men and women led the way to provide activities that included worship and music, celebration and fellowship, activities to include children and youth, clergy visits, and giving back to the community through volunteer hours. Let me review a few memories from that celebration:

Epiphany 2007- Bishop VonRosenberg preached and celebrated at the epiphany service. In his sermon, the Bishop talked of following a light from one place of safety to another. He talked of hope and faith. The anniversary banner was used in procession for the first time.

Visits from 14 clergy blessed us with their presence, including Anne Bonnyman, Alex Barron, Wayne Kinyon (our first deacon), Smoky Oats, Gordon Temple, Jon Shuler, and Larry Gipson.

The motto of “50 and forward” came from our beloved late Betsy Wheeler.

Celebrations of weddings and renewal of marriage vows.

Worship through the gift of music with the Epiphany service, the joint choral evensong with the St. John's and Ascension choirs. the commissioned Ascension Day anthem, and the homecoming choir.

Celebration and fellowship with the recognition of charter members, wardens, veterans, homecoming, the pig roast, rally day, the children's birthday party, and --- don't forget the Mardi Gras Ball!!!

And... the giving back to the community with the 50 volunteer hours campaign. Over 7900 volunteer hours were given by our parishioners to community service.

The events captured God's spirit and helped breathe life back into our parish. The steering committee could not have done it without the support of the vestry, the many volunteers that came forward to assist preparing for events, the execution of the events, and many behind the scenes activities. Thanks to all of you who came forward and participated and came to the events!! We hope that some of these events mentioned bring good memories to your mind and breathe into you the spirit of the future.

In closing, I want to take one moment to go back to our clergy visits. Each one spoke of our past; each one spoke of our future and how god's hand is at work at Church of the Ascension. Anne Bonnyman reminded us that 50 years ago she sat across the street at Sacred Heart School and witnessed the Church of the Ascension's foundation being laid. She spoke of our rich history and the evidence that God is in our midst. She reminded us that

as we think and pray about our next 50 years, that someone will be sitting in these pews 50 years from now thanking us, just as we thank our forbears. Larry Gipson, who also spoke of our past, spoke of his sense of movement in our church, a sense of moving toward the future. All of the clergy brought to us sacred gifts from the past and present. They reminded us in an intricate way that God is in our midst, calling us to move forward as disciples. As Anne Bonnyman said in her sermon, “ O God, our times are in your hand.”

As we close this anniversary year, we have had a chance to go back retrospectively and reflect on what has happened in our parish and to each one of us, individually, looking at how God has moved in our lives. God has used and blessed this time for us. We have experienced fellowship, worship, and the love of God. Many of us have reconnected in different ways. As we move forward with patience and with hope, let us give our Parish and ourselves to the Breath – Maker and the Life-giver.

Let us pray...

God, Breath of Life, there are moments when we have felt like the dry bones filling Ezekiel’s valley. As we move forward, help us to trust in you, to believe in your dance of life in us. Take the dry bones of our lives and parish and enliven them in a way we have never dreamed possible. Bless our dry and rusty spirits with your deep and stirring love. Renew our dreams. Fill us with enthusiasm for life- May we always look to you as our source of life.

AMEN