

**Is the Church Safe?**  
**Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:1-21**  
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A few years ago now I came across some statistics that caught my eye. The news item headline was: **Play It Safe**. The article said, “Avoid riding in automobiles because they are responsible for 20% of all fatal accidents. Do not stay home because 17% of all accidents occur in the home. Avoid walking on streets or sidewalks because 14% of all accidents occur to pedestrians. Avoid traveling by air, rail or water because 16% of all accidents involve these forms of transportation.”

However (and this is the important part), “You will be pleased to learn that only .001% of all deaths occur in worship services at church, and these are usually related to previous physical disorders. Therefore, logic tells us that the safest place for you to be at any given point in time is at church. Bible study is safe, too. The percentage of deaths during Bible study is even less. For safety’s sake, attend church and read your Bible.” (Brother Maurus Zoeller, O.S.B., St. Meinrad Archabbey, as quoted in *The Christian Century*, May 3, 2003, p.7.)

How do you think that would work as our angle on evangelism?! In any case, it got me thinking about the question: Is the church safe?

Certainly in one sense we may give a hearty “Yes!” in answer. We have the statistics to back it up!

But there is an opposing view...a minority report. A well-used quote from Annie Dillard perhaps gets at it best. Dillard does find most churches “safe,” but she wonders why this should be the case. “Why do people in churches seem like cheerful, brainless tourists on a packaged tour of the Absolute?” she wonders.

“On the whole,” Dillard continues, “I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday

morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return." (Annie Dillard in **Teaching a Stone to Talk.**)

Is the church safe? By Dillard's account, it ought not to be. Is the church safe? Well, yes *and* no.

Yes, the church is safe, but not because it is "my" church or "your" church or even "our" church. The church is safe, but not because we are part of the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta or even the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). The church is safe because it belongs to God. And because Christ is Head of the Church, we can trust in him to judge and ultimately defeat our sinful words, decisions, and actions even when they are sanctioned by "the church." It has happened before. The Holy Spirit has moved in new ways in the church, defeating and overturning our sinful sanctioning of slavery and our injustice in the subordination of women. And I believe the Spirit is moving among us again, against a very tight barrier, in order to widen our circle to include gay and lesbian Christians fully in the life and ministry of the church. So, is the church safe? Yes, because the church belongs not to us, but to God, who will use the church to accomplish God's purposes in the world. (See *A Declaration of Faith*, Chapter 7, section 1.)

On a mere human level, of course, we want the church to be a safe place for children and youth—for all of us at any age. A safe place where we may share our lives. The place where we may bring our highest joys and our deepest sorrows, knowing that this community will surround us with Christ-like care. Here in the church, it should be safe to ask questions and to try new things—even if (God forbid) "we've never done it that way before"! Here, each person is to be treasured as a beloved child of God. The church should be the safe place where forgiveness is offered; where mutual understanding is patiently practiced; and where hope never dies.

Someone at the church I served in Asheville once said: "This church is a place big enough for laughter and small enough for tears." We liked that description so much that it became part of our Vision statement.

Is the church safe? We answer that question by the way we treat each other and relate to one another every day, year after year. Is the church safe, by God's grace may it be so.

But because today is Pentecost Sunday, we must also acknowledge that another truthful, faithful answer to the question is “No, the church is not safe.” The two Scripture readings today remind us of why we may need those crash helmets and life preservers!

The first story is about Ezekiel. Ezekiel says that God’s hand was on him and God’s breath blew him right into the middle of a valley. Now, I should tell you up front that God’s hand and breath upon you is the most wonderful and terrifying thing that can happen to a person! Just ask Ezekiel. There he was, blown by God into a valley, and as far as Ezekiel’s eyes could see, the floor of that valley was littered with bones. Dry bones. Bones so dried up and bleached out that there was no DNA left to extract from one of them! God led Ezekiel around in that valley where the bones clinked and rattled and crunched under his feet all the way up to his knees.

“Mortal,” God said to Ezekiel, as if to emphasize that all that separated him from those bones was mere muscle and skin... “Mortal, can these bones live?” Now, if anyone else had asked that question, the answer would have been “No.” But since it was God asking, Ezekiel gave himself some theological wiggle room. He answered, “O Lord God, you know.” God told Ezekiel to start prophesying. So, Ezekiel started talking...started preaching...preaching his heart out to a bunch of dry, lifeless bones...waiting to see what would happen...

Well, the Spirit of God breathed on the bones; and then the breath of God poured in from the north and the south and the east and the west. And sure enough, those bones started hooking up; muscle and sinew grew, flesh appeared...and then the people (for that is what they were becoming) started to breathe, too, and stood up on their own two feet. And all of God’s sudden, Ezekiel had himself a living, breathing congregation! I tell you, it’s a story that gives a preacher hope every week when she steps into the pulpit and sees the first five yawns of the morning!

In Acts, the scene is just as wild. There’s a crowd gathered in that upper room, waiting for God. They were scared, unsure...didn’t think they were up to whatever God had in mind for them next. And suddenly, God’s Spirit blew over them like they were a bunch of dried up bones in a valley. With fire not just on their heads but also under their feet, the disciples spilled out of that house and into the streets. The wind of God, the breath of God’s

own life filled up their lungs and they started talking. All in different languages, yet pedestrians and passers-by understood every word spoken. And every word spoken was about God's deeds of power; about Christ's rising from the dead...

In both of these stories, the "waking," our wide-awake God had drawn them out to where they could never return to the way things were. Is the church safe? These stories indicate that the answer is an uproarious, gloriously unsettled and hope-filled "No!"

As I mentioned last week, we Presbyterians get a little nervous about a word like "evangelism." Well, if we want to start making a list of words we don't know how to handle, we can add "the Holy Spirit." When I was growing up, the only "Holy Spirit hymns" in the Presbyterian hymnal were soft and gentle. We sang one of them this morning: "Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me..." like a gentle summer rain, fall on me like that, please. Another was "Spirit of God descend upon my heart," with that one asking God to "check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh" in me. "Breathe on me breath of God" was another that lulls us into God's comforting arms. And of course, the Holy Spirit is, as Jesus said, "the Comforter, the Advocate." But it was not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that we Presbyterians got brave enough to put a little "umph" into the Pentecost/Holy Spirit section of our hymnal...or to write an Affirmation of Faith that put some theological muscle and veins and skin onto the skeleton affirmation: "I believe in the Holy Ghost."

We orderly Presbyterians can be too nervous about the often *disorderly* Spirit of God.

But listen to what our own Book of Order, of all things, says in the section known poetically as G-3.0400. Having reminded us that the Church is called to be Christ's faithful evangelist by going into the world making disciples; that we are to demonstrate the new reality in Christ by how we love our own members and by the quality of our common life; and that we are to participate in what God is doing in the world by living for others through mission...the Book of Order then says this:

*The Church is called to undertake this mission even at the risk of losing its life, trusting in God alone as the author and giver of life, sharing*

*the gospel, and doing those deeds in the world that point beyond themselves to the new reality in Christ.*

The Church is called to this undertaking *even at the risk of losing its own life*. Then the Book of Order says we are called to a new openness to the presence of God...

No kidding. That is what Pentecost is all about. A new openness to the presence of God. Taking risks. Your Session right now is reading a provocative book on this very subject...a book that challenges us to re-think what we are doing and to rearrange our priorities. It is calling us to a new openness to the presence of God; a new openness to our own membership and institutional structures; and a new openness to others beyond ourselves. Its title is: *Winning on Purpose*. Most of us are more comfortable with *Predestined to be Right Where We Are*.

On Thursday, I stopped by a classroom on the Seminary campus. A group of clergy were on campus for a few days to think and share ideas about mission and revitalization for the North American church. They were watching a DVD of a man talking about how we love to look at numbers in our churches. We count the money that comes in, of course, to keep track of expenses and mission and also as a barometer of how the church is doing spiritually to some extent. We count how many members we have. We even count, he was saying, how many people come to worship each Sunday. We keep track, week after week, of how many are in the pews.

And then he said this: God has a different way of counting. God counts how many people are *not* there. Think of the parables: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the buried treasure...God is counting how many people we are missing out on. Here in the church, we aren't sharing with them the good news we have received. We aren't benefiting and growing from the spiritual gifts and the fresh insights and the new energies they could bring to us.

I didn't stay and watch the rest of the DVD, but I don't think the speaker was interested in putting us down, in making us feel bad about ourselves or our church. Instead I think he was excited that there is so much possibility available to us! If we are open, that is, to God's hand and breath leading us out—out from the familiar upper room of our house into the diverse streets outside. If we are open to the Spirit of God drawing us out into a valley—not filled with lifeless bones after all—but filled instead with

people who are asking good, probing questions; people longing to hear words of life (and there are lots of places and philosophies offering such words); but we have found words of life that we believe will restore life in them.

Is the church safe? The right answer to that is Yes. And the right answer is also an uproarious, gloriously unsettled, and hope-filled No.

Amen.