

“Power Within Us”

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Ezekiel 37:1-14 Acts 2:1-13

How strong are you? And do you think you could be stronger, if your life depended on it? You’ve probably heard stories of people who suddenly gained incredible strength when faced with a crisis of life or death. Someone lifts up a heavy car or truck to save a child who is pinned underneath. Or someone shatters unbreakable glass with their bare hands, or leaps over impossible obstacles or moves giant rocks to get away from danger, or to get *to* someone whose life is at risk. I’m sure Jack Peters has a few stories to tell as a firefighter. Or some of you may have stories to tell, if you have ever served as a soldier in combat. People are capable of performing amazing feats under pressure. What is it that calls forth extraordinary power in people? Of course there’s adrenaline, the hormone our bodies produce in stressful situations. Adrenalin makes us more alert and heightens our energy and power. But is there more to it than that?

The Bible says yes. In the stories of Samson in the book of Judges feats of power are attributed to “the Spirit of the Lord.” Samson was a legendary hero who judged Israel between the time of Moses and King David. And according to the book of Judges, his superhuman strength came from the Spirit of the Lord. In one story (ch. 14) Samson was walking in the vineyards when a young lion suddenly appeared and roared at him. And it says that “the spirit of the Lord *rushed* on (Samson), and he tore the lion apart barehanded...” Later, again empowered by the spirit, Samson killed 1,000 of his enemies with the jawbone of a donkey. And of course there’s the famous episode when Samson pulled the pillars of the house down, killing himself and all 3,000 people inside. Would you like to have Samson as a member of our church? Yet all this brute strength is attributed to the spirit of the Lord.

Spiritual power can be used for both good and evil. Samson seemed to use it to destroy whatever he felt like destroying at the time, and to get his own way. He didn’t seem to be interested in God’s will at all. This is the same man who said to his father and mother, “I saw a Philistine women at Timneh; now get her for me as my wife.” When his parents asked him, “Do you have to choose a wife from among our enemies?” he answered, “Get her. I like her.” (period). You’d think, this being the Bible, that the wedding would bring peace and harmony between the Philistines and Israel. But far from bringing peace, the marriage brought more occasions for violence, all fueled by Samson’s desires.

Now of course these stories of Samson are among the most ancient stories of the Bible and have a mythical quality to them. But the point is, Samson's power came from God's spirit, the same spirit that moved over the face of the waters at creation calling forth life and bringing order out of chaos. And in most stories of the Bible the spirit of God increases people's ability to do good. When the spirit of the Lord came upon Saul, it made him able to lead the people as their king, even though Saul was a deeply troubled man who struggled with mental illness. And when the spirit entered David, it heightened David's natural charisma and talents and made him into a great king. Whenever a prophet anointed a king with oil and the spirit, it gave the king the power to fulfill his call from God, if he was willing to listen and obey God's voice.

And this is the same spirit that came upon the disciples at Pentecost. Pentecost was actually a Jewish festival, 50 days after Passover, to celebrate God's gift of the Law, or Torah. On that day the believers were together, praying as usual. Suddenly the house was filled with noise. It sounded like the rush of a violent wind, but there was no wind. Instead, they saw something that looked like tongues of fire resting on each of them. They opened their mouths and began to speak in different languages. People who had come from all over the world to celebrate this festival heard the commotion, and languages they recognized as their own. So a crowd gathered to find out what was happening. And they each heard in their own language, the believers speaking of God's deeds of power.

Pentecost marked a change in the followers of Jesus. According to the story, that day Peter, who was an uneducated fisherman, got up and delivered an inspired speech, explaining what this commotion all meant. And in response 3,000 people joined them and were baptized. And that was just the beginning. This group of believers was filled with life and power. They came together and shared their possessions, so that no one among them was in need (Acts 4:34). They healed the sick, spoke with power and did things they never imagined were possible. And this same spirit dwells in us, who are sitting here today. Do you believe God's power is within you? And what difference does it make?

There are many different kinds of power in this world. There's physical power, where you can move heavy objects, or use your body or other physical instruments to get your way by force. Military power is an advanced form of physical power. There's also intellectual power, the ability to have an effect through knowledge or understanding. There's sexual power, where you get your way through the power of attraction. There's political power, the ability to influence or control public policies and behavior. There's economic power, the ability to produce, accumulate, buy or sell goods, or determine other people's access to goods. And there's personal power, the ability to direct your own life,

or to influence others personally, not because of a position you hold, but by your own personality, who you are.

Spiritual power is different. It's a power that comes from connecting with and becoming a vessel for something larger or higher than ourselves; the power of love, the power of truth, the power of life. Spiritual power can call on any of the other powers I mentioned. But it is a power in itself, and at its best, is used to carry out God's will. And according to the Bible, this power is available to anyone who believes, including you.

Mainline Protestants don't tend to make much of the power of the spirit. Maybe it's because we don't really believe it will make a difference. Or maybe we're afraid to find out what difference it might make. After all, what did the disciples do after they received the Holy Spirit? They began to testify or witness with power. And Presbyterians are not known for our love of speaking boldly about things religious. We like to think of religious experience as a private matter. Why speak about what we have seen or experienced of God, and risk offending someone with our words? They might think we're some kind of religious nuts.

The spirit also led the disciples to sacrifice and work for the good of the whole community, and not just their own personal needs, as it says in Acts 2:44, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." That's a bit scary, the idea that the spirit might lead us to share our resources and time with others, and put our own needs aside for the good of others. So many people avoid the subject of the power of God's spirit. That was then; but today we don't want the spirit to disrupt our lives, or shake up our world. So we write it off as a myth... it's just a story.

But there are believers today who do experience the power of the spirit. They speak freely about their experiences of God, and not just for political purposes or to shame others into changing to be like them, but because they have good news to share. They live radically generous lives. They welcome people into their homes and include strangers and foreigners at their tables. They drop everything to help someone in need and offer their money for God to use. They work in hospitals and clinics around the world, or provide free professional services to people in need in this country. They volunteer in homeless shelters, advocate for immigrants and work for justice for racial minorities, the poor and downtrodden. And they do it for the joy of being part of what God is doing on this earth. Some of them are here among us today. And they help us know that the power of God is indeed among us.

Venge read from Ezekiel this morning, God said to the people, "I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live... then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act." In the story, God had led the prophet Ezekiel to a valley of dry bones, and

commanded him to deliver the Word of the Lord, and breathe life into the bones. The bones are supposed to symbolize the people of Israel, who had lost hope living in exile. The Babylonians had defeated them and they were living as captives in a foreign land, feeling helpless and hopeless, like dry bones with no flesh on them, and no life.

And God said to Ezekiel, “Can these bones live?” How could Ezekiel answer that question? The only reasonable answer would be “no.” Obviously dry bones can’t come to life again. But it was God asking the question, so Ezekiel answered, “O Lord God, you know.” And God did bring the people of Israel back to life. The people listened to the words of Ezekiel and began to believe them. They began to make plans. And eventually they returned to their land, and they rebuilt the temple and found new life.

Can these bones here live? Does the spirit of God have power on earth today? Can God speak and act through our lives in ways we never imagined were possible? We may not be able to answer that question with a definitive “yes,” but we can say, “O Lord God, you know.” And we can open our hearts to the gift of the Holy Spirit and the power of love, of truth and of life. And we can let that power work through us to bless the world. God’s power is within us. In Jesus’ name, Amen.