

“God’s New Groove”  
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Ezekiel 37: 1-14

As “Daddy” to four- and six-year-olds, my world revolves around characters, characters and movies – *The Lion King, Beauty and the Beast, The Little Mermaid, Happy Feet, The Incredibles, Mary Poppins, The Emperor’s New Groove.*

So there you have it -- out of my Disney-programmed brain, there’s your sermon title, “God’s New Groove”.

The scripture we just heard today was Ezekiel’s vision of the desert valley, a dry desert valley, filled with bones, dusty bones, dry bones, dry bones long removed from the living. “Can these dry bones live?” God asks him.

I have to tell you, in seminary, some of my Baptist classmates joked about how this scripture about dead, dry bones . . . should give Presbyterians hope! We decent-and-in-good-order people, the frozen chosen. “Thank God”, they’d say, “that the dead in Christ will be raised up -- there is hope for Presbyterians!”

Well, maybe in a way they’re right. We’ve gone from a peak of nearly 4-1/2 million Presbyterians in the late 1960’s, declining to 3 million members twenty years ago, to just over 2 million today – 2.2 million to be exact.

But the evangelicals have been growing. Maybe you saw the articles last week about the research from the Pew Foundation on religion in America today. Someone’s doing something right.

It’s not the mainline denominations, where all we’ve been hearing are variations on a theme, variations on an old theme, when maybe what we need is a whole new symphony.

We are sometimes so concerned about polarizing issues that divide us, we can’t seem to see the opportunities emerging from some new trends. Presbyterians, no further than that -- all Christians – since the very beginning have been in-fighting. From Peter and Paul arguing about Jews and Gentiles, to the hate speech we hear from so-called Christians today, Christianity seems more about the battle than about good news.

But none of that – none of it – releases us from the Great Commandment. It’s still about mission, education of youth, multifaith understanding, peacemaking, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, faith development at camp & conference centers.

We are at the edge of what Jim Wallis has called a “New Great Awakening”. For traditional evangelicals, and for those of us committed to social justice in an age of religious diversity and pluralism, there are so many examples. But one I want to lift up today is one called “Repairers of the Breach”.

Barbara Wheeler, a good friend of this congregation, President of our own Auburn Seminary here in the City, and a leader of the progressive wing of our denomination, has been meeting with, no – consorting with – the “enemy.” Yes, over the past seven years, she has had a series of public discussions with Richard Mouw, the President of Fuller Seminary out in California, the

world's largest seminary, and an evangelical one at that. Outside of our 12 Presbyterian seminaries, Fuller graduates more Presbyterian ministers than any other seminary.

Wheeler asks, "How will we draw anyone else to us if we don't show them that there is some extraordinary power in Jesus Christ?" If we can't get along with other Presbyterians, much less other Christians, what does that say about our willingness to live out God's reconciling love?

And Richard Mouw chimes in, "we need to work at discerning in each other a genuine commitment to Jesus Christ, even when we may have serious theological disagreements." He continues, "and I hope we can speak together with a bolder common voice on matters on which there is or should be agreement among conservatives and liberals, evangelicals and progressives." And he points to the recent stand of many evangelical leaders to break with conservative politicians, to raise issues such as global warming, reaching out to Moslem leaders, opposition to some aspects of American foreign policy, the war, human trafficking, the use of torture.

Maybe we need to start looking for the good in others, our opponents. What binds us as Christians, rather than what separates us. It's been said that religion and un-religion are both sinful to the degree that they widen the gap between you and the people who don't share your views.<sup>1</sup>

I had to laugh at an email chain letter I got the other day, a play on the old joke about how many people it takes to change a light bulb, but with a religious twist.

So how many evangelicals does it take to change a light bulb? Only one – their hands are already in the air.

Or Baptists – at least 15. One to change the bulb, and three committees to approve the change and decide who brings the potato salad and fried chicken.

Episcopalians – Three. One to call the electrician, one to mix the drinks, and one to talk about how much better the old one was.

Presbyterians of course, need none. The lights will go on and off at pre-destined times.

Lutherans don't believe in change. And the Amish – well, they just ask, "what's a light bulb?"

We may need a new relevance – a new way. We need our commitment to social justice, yes. But how do we reach those who don't know how to open a hymnal? How do we bring in new members?

Often the question seems just how fervently do liberal Christians believe? Can progressives be evangelical, in the literal meaning of the word, spreading the good news. Maybe the issue is how to "warm-up", "heat-up", "fire-up" progressive Christianity?

Historically, you know, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fervor was the mark of the progressive side of American protestants. "Theology in a coffin," was how the conservatives were described. And now it seems to be reversed.

Yet for sure there are Christian values, reformed values, widely shared among all of us, right and left, progressive and evangelical.

For one: The sovereignty of God. God is in charge. God rules.

You know, I'll let you in on a little secret about how to pass the ordination exams. Sort of like the formula for Coca Cola – it's been passed down from generation to generation, hushed tones in seminary hallways. On those reformed exams, whenever a question of theology comes up, whatever the question, the answer is always . . . the sovereignty of God. God is in charge. God rules.

Well there, I've let it out. So much for my clergy secret society membership.

And another common shared view is the critical importance of sacred text, of scripture, whether we read the bible literally, or take it all in as a record of God's relationships with God's people – scripture is central.

And worship – Maybe we need to listen to how others see God, and maybe even appreciate worship that is not quite to our taste. I know driving in our car it's a race to see who can change the radio station fastest whenever a Christian pop station comes on the air. We can't dismiss and walk away from worship and church structure, or worse, reject it as somehow less authentic, just because it's unfamiliar.

And theology – Maybe we need to realize that it's not a polarized choice. On the one extreme, seeing what we can dispose of as unessential, trying to make our faith acceptable to the largest possible group. On the other extreme, a confessional, doctrinaire, sign-on-the-dotted-line subscription for salvation. Maybe it's neither, or maybe it's both. Or maybe God is showing us a new way.

There is some new language being used to describe a vibrant, growing, engaging kind of Christianity that's sweeping the church in our post-modern world. And we all need to pay attention. Maybe you've heard of them: The "emerging church." And the "missional church."

The "emerging church," broadly speaking, describes a free-flowing movement that embraces in an inclusive way the intersection of faith with the world, using new technologies, incorporating a pluralistic approach to different religious traditions, a willingness to employ new structures and new organizations to live out one's faith.

In the old liberal mainline church of the past 50 years, the centralized structure of the church is what supported action in areas of social justice. In the emerging church, the energy and passion up-swells from the grassroots, upward from the individual rather than downward from the church.

Faith formation, too, focuses on the individual's commitment first. Action flows from individual faith and spiritual growth, more so than from institutional affiliation or traditional church program ministries. There's a willingness to explore differing patterns of Christian life, far more inclusive than traditional evangelicalism – or traditional Presbyterianism.

Yet at the same time as there's a more individual approach to faith, the emerging church is also characterized by a new social activism that is both critical and creative. Mission is understood to be a wider set of activities than just evangelism.

That's the basic premise of the "missional church". It's that missions or ministry are not simply one of the functions, one of the programs of the church. It constitutes the very essence of the church, the very nature of the church. God is a God on mission. And God has sent the church on mission.

It's not just professing our faith, or focusing on our own salvation, or thinking of the gospel as just the good news of what God has done in Christ to pardon individual sinners who have been "born again" into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Instead it's about what we do with our faith, with ethical implications for every dimension of life: reconciliation, justice, peace, healing, liberation, love. It's a community of faith that visibly and effectively participates in God's activity in the world.

A recent study of a thousand congregations showed that there are several common, defining elements in progressive emerging churches. In these very successful, growing congregations, we see spiritual vitality -- innovation in worship, a deepened spirituality as a focus in both worship and education. We see intellectual integrity -- looking to science and scholarship, and learning about other faiths. We see vitality, without arrogance -- a confidence in one's own faith, coupled with an openness to learn about other traditions, and to join them in common missions.

These congregations break down gender boundaries -- welcoming not only women, but GLBT Christians into full participation, and working to change denominational policy. And finally, these congregations blend concern and action for justice and ecology.<sup>2</sup>

These growing, exploding, emerging churches seem to be characterized by humility, openness, the willingness to reform and change. Knowing that all past and all current ideas about God are limited and distorted; we can't know God fully. That other traditions may understand certain things better. To keep seeking, searching, again and again, to be ever-reforming. And perhaps most importantly: integration. To focus not only on orthodoxy, what we say we believe -- but on orthopraxy, the application, the practice, the living out of our faith.<sup>3</sup>

You've heard me talk before about being "born again", and sometimes in not so kind ways. Maybe it's the 60s protester deep within, but there's something inside of me that forces me to scream out "Born again?!? Born again?!?"

I was born once. Born once, into a Christian family. Born once, a cradle Presbyterian, two generations of ministers before me. Born into a family, a faith, a community, where I can say, with pride, "Born again? -- No."

The value for me, the faith journey for me, and the spiritual experience I want to provide for my three little girls, is not to be born again, to be able to point to the day and hour even to the minute of when they became a Christian.

Instead, I want my children to never have known a time when they were not Christian.

But in thinking about being "born again," there are a lot of positives. Thinking about things in a fresh way, a heightened sense of self-awareness. For all of us -- clergy too (although we may be forced to think about it more often, like it or not) -- things get stale. We, our faith, needs to be rejuvenated.

I love, I envy, the energy and fervor of new converts, experiencing their faith for the first time. Being a Christian, standing up and joining a church, means something very different for some folks, new Christians, first generation Christians, Christians for the first time, who sometimes are forced to take a stand against family, culture, tradition, in order to be a Christian. How to recapture that faith? How to feel the energy of our faith commitment?

You heard me earlier, grieving about the decline in Presbyterians, and that the evangelicals seem to be moving ahead. But it's not just the evangelicals.

Look at our own First Church. We're now around 1200 members. Fifteen years ago we were less than half that number. It's because of mission. It's because of ministry. It's because of community.

It's because we stand up and say, as strongly as the most fervent evangelical: God is love. God is in charge. And God loved us so much that the only way to share that love completely was to come journey with us, as one of us.

Christ shows us God's love, and gives us a way forward. And in doing that, God changed what it means to be human, and broke open the former limits of life and death.

It's not about saying the right words, or subscribing to the list of acceptable theologies. It's not about who's saved and who's not, who's going to be on the pew bench next to us for all eternity.

It's about this world, not the next.

It's about being willing to stand up and say, progressives and evangelicals alike: I follow in the ways, I follow in the footsteps, of Christ, and I am a Christian.

And that is why we engage the world. That is why we do justice, and why we love mercy, and why we walk humbly.

Emerging Church, Missional Church, it's God's New Groove – well, maybe not really all that new, it might just seem that way to us sometimes.

Dead bones, dry bones, Presbyterian bones.

“And the breath came into them, [bones, and flesh, and sinews and skin,] and the bones lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.”

The question for me, for all of us: Will we remain those dry bones, those dead bones?

Or will we be the breath?

AMEN.

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> Hal Taussig, *A New Spiritual Home: Progressive Christianity at the Grass Roots*, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, 2004.