

A publication of Pittsburgh Theological Seminary



# PENTECOST

For those engaged in theologically reflective ministry

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As you prepare for Pentecost, we hope that you'll find these reflections by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty scholars to be helpful. Perhaps these sermons and blog post will inspire your own message, lead to a small group Bible study, or simply bring you closer to God—the One who in the Spirit has drawn close to us.

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# GHOST STORY



# Steven Tuell

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Looking for a good ghost story? Read Ezekiel 37:1-14. If you've never heard this one before, you're likely to wonder, "What is this doing in the Bible?" It's a scene out of a horror movie or a Stephen King novel. First, the prophet is taken in a vision by the hand of the Lord to a valley filled with dry, dusty, disjointed bones.



God asks Ezekiel, "Human one, can these bones live again?" (37:3). The obvious answer is no—there is no life, and no possibility of life, in this place! The bodies strewn across the valley are not only dead, they are long dead (37:2)—there's no point in dialing 9-1-1! But since his call, Ezekiel has seen (see chapters 1-3 and 8-11) and done (see chapters 4-5; 12:1-

20; 24:15-27; as well as 37:15-28) some very odd things in the Lord's service. So he answers, simply "Lord God, only you know" (37:3).

Now God commands the prophet, “Prophesy over these bones, and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the Lord’s word!’” (37:4). As Ezekiel delivers God’s promise of life to the dead bones, he hears “a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone” (37:7, NRSV). He watches as, in accordance with the word he had proclaimed (37:5), the bones are joined by tendons and covered over with flesh. Now, instead of a valley full of dry bones, the prophet is standing in a valley filled with corpses.



Again God speaks: “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, human one! Say to the breath, ‘The Lord God proclaims: Come from the four winds, breath! Breathe into these dead bodies and let them live!’” (37:9). Hebrew writers love puns. A pun on the different meanings of the Hebrew word *ruakh* (“breath” in the 37:8-9) runs through this story. First, this word can mean “breath,” so to say that there was no *ruakh* in the bodies (37:8) simply means that they were not breathing. Related to this meaning is the use of *ruakh* for “wind” (37:9). In keeping with the invisible force of the wind and the life-giving power of the breath is a third meaning: *ruakh* can be rendered “spirit”—that is, the empowering, enlivening agency of people, and in particular, of God (more on that one shortly). So, as Ezekiel prophesied to the wind (*ruakh*), breath (*ruakh*) entered



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the bodies, and “they came to life and stood on their feet, an extraordinarily large company” (37:10)—not, please note, this



but this



What does this vision mean? In 37:11–14 God explains. The dry bones are Ezekiel’s community, the house of Israel, exiled and in despair. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope has perished. We are completely finished” (37:11)—and they are right! Jerusalem is destroyed, the king is in chains, the temple is gone, and the people are scattered, in hiding or in exile.

But, deliverance is promised—a resurrection for dead Israel. The Lord declares, “I will put my breath [there’s that third meaning of *ruakh*—God’s spirit, God’s very life] in you, and you will live. I will plant you on your fertile land, and you will know that I am the Lord. I’ve spoken, and I will do it. This is what the Lord says” (37:14). Hope for the future, Ezekiel was convinced, would come from God and God alone through the gift of God’s life-giving Spirit.

On Sunday another ghost story will be told in churches around the world. It comes from Acts 2 in the New Testament, but it builds on the same ideas and images Ezekiel used. Jesus had told his followers, “Look, I’m sending to you what my Father promised, but you are to stay in the city until you have been furnished with heavenly power” (Luke 24:49). So they had remained in Jerusalem. As our story begins, they have been there, waiting and praying, ever since Jesus’ resurrection. It is now Pentecost, the Jewish festival held 50 days after Passover.

Suddenly, the room where they are praying is filled with wind and flame, and each person gathered in that room is filled with an overpowering urge to speak! Praising God, they pour out into the street and discover to their astonishment and delight that everyone in that crowd—Pentecost pilgrims who had come to Jerusalem from across the Roman world—understands perfectly what they, the disciples, are saying: “We hear them declaring the mighty works of God in our own languages!” (Acts 2:11).



**WE NEED THE GIFT OF  
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Ezekiel's ghost story reminds us of the beginning—of how God had created the first human from the ground and breathed life into him.



Luke's ghost story in Acts also takes us back to Genesis—this time to the tower of Babel and the curse that confused human languages and divided the human community.



Just as in Ezekiel God's Spirit undoes the curse of exile by bringing back to their homeland those who had thought themselves as good as dead, so on Pentecost God's Spirit undoes the curse of Babel and restores all humanity to oneness.

Perhaps like Ezekiel's community we have experienced abandonment and despair.

Certainly, the curse of Babel has stricken deeply into our community, even into our families, bringing division and confusion. The solution, for us as for them, is God's Spirit, the Holy Ghost!

That may be hard for us to hear. Ghosts are scary, after all—why should we let go of what seems so solid and real? Why exchange the visible and tangible for the invisible, mysterious world of God's spirit? Quite simply, because we must. We need God's spirit



because we do not have the answers we seek, and we cannot find them. We need the gift of God's spirit to empower and enliven us, to renew and reunite us.

W. Sibley Towner puts it this way: "We need all the energy and effort we can muster to concentrate on the whisperings of the only ghost that matters, whose name is Holy. This spirit who proceeds from God doesn't rock in chairs or frighten dogs, but plants winsome words in the human heart that yield great fruit if the heart is supple and ready."

So may it be for you and yours this day. God bless you—and Happy Pentecost!

*The Rev. Dr. Steven Tuell's particular research interest is the biblical literature of the early Persian period. He has written numerous articles and book reviews, including multiple entries in Feasting on the Word (a commentary on the Common Lectionary published by Westminster John Knox). Tuell has written The Law of the Temple in Ezekiel 40-48 in the Harvard Semitic Monographs Series; a commentary on 1 and 2 Chronicles in the Interpretation Series; a commentary on Ezekiel, published by Baker in the Understanding the Old Testament Commentary series; and with John Strong co-edited Constituting the Community, a collection of essays on community in the Hebrew Bible. Tuell has just completed a commentary on Nahum through Malachi for Smith-Helwys. An ordained elder in The United Methodist Church, Tuell preaches and teaches frequently throughout the area.*

*This post was posted on Dr. Tuell's blog, The Bible Guy, May 16, 2015. [Read it online: http://www.steventuell.net/?p=164.](http://www.steventuell.net/?p=164)*

# WHAT SHOULD WE DO?



# Heather H. Vacek

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**H**ave you had moments in your life when you just needed to get oriented? To stop for a minute or two—or maybe a day or two—to catch your breath and get your bearings? Lots of events, big and small, bad and good, can cause such a need . . . the end or the beginning of a job, a move to a new house, a new city, a major illness, the birth of a child, the death of one we love, even the beginning of a new school year, new classmates, new colleagues, new challenges . . . Things like this can make us feel like we need to stand still long enough to figure out what’s up and maybe even what’s next.

It seems to me that something similar might have been true for believers of the early church. As the passage that we just read began, we heard the people ask, “Brothers, what should we do?” We’ve spent the last week or so in worship traveling through the first chapters of the Book of Acts. The believers of the early church had been on quite a ride, and so their question hardly comes as a surprise. The things they’d experienced had to have been unsettling, even as they were wonderful. Perhaps, if you were here yesterday, you felt some of that awe and amazement, that grace and unsettledness as we heard Rebecca and others, enact the account of Pentecost in worship.

Scripture: Acts 2:37-47



After the Spirit had come upon the crowd in Jerusalem, Peter tried to orient them, to give them some grounding. He recounted prophecies spoken by Joel . . . by David . . . . He assured the people that they could know with certainty that God had made Jesus both Lord and Messiah. And maybe those in the crowd, those who were soon to join the new community, understood the wonders around them, or maybe they didn't. What we hear in today's text is that they were "cut to the heart," they were pierced, pricked in their very being. They were deeply troubled. Those events, perhaps Peter's words, had a deep impact. But . . . those gathered around were still left with a question, "Brothers, what should we do?"

"Repent," Peter tells them. "Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ." And about 3000 were.

And then, "Brothers and sisters, what should we do?"

After their baptisms, that question could only be answered thinking in terms of Christian community. Those new believers were no longer simply individuals—they had welcomed God's message. They were the people of God. Called by God. Saved by Christ. They were those upon whom the Holy Spirit had come.

"Brothers and sisters, what should we do?" As a community, "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." They did those things, not as lone individuals, but as the body of Christ. Their work and worship together oriented and grounded them.



**THEY WERE THE PEOPLE  
OF GOD. CALLED BY GOD.  
SAVED BY CHRIST.”**

Teaching and learning. Fellowship. The breaking of bread. Prayers. These are the activities that sustain us as a community. These activities done in and through Christ. I can think of no better way to find our bearings . . . to take a deep breath . . . to discern what's up and turn to what's next as part of God's call and claim on our lives.

Brothers and sisters, it will be together, through God in Christ, and in the power of the Holy Spirit, that we figure out, what' next . . . .

What should we do now? Together, we teach and learn and fellowship and break bread and pray. That is the rhythm of our life together here as a Seminary community, and the rhythm of our lives together in the other places in the body of Christ where we serve and are served.

I offer thanks this morning for this community, for the communities of Christ that have grounded us in the past, that have given us our bearings, that have sent us here, that have enabled us to be here with one another.

In the words of our opening hymn, as the community of Christ we are:

One in spirit, one in life,  
One amid earth's frequent strife.  
We are one in faith and one in love,  
One, in hope of heaven, above.



**‘BEING MADE ONE WITH  
CHRIST, WE ARE MADE  
ONE WITH ALL WHO  
BELONG TO CHRIST . . . .’**

As we come to the table this morning, let us be reminded that “being made one with Christ, we are made one with all who belong to Christ, united with the church in every time and place” (*Presbyterian Book of Order*, 42). “Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.” Let the same be said of us. Amen.

*The Rev. Dr. Heather Hartung Vacek joined the faculty at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary in 2012 as assistant professor of church history and in 2016 became vice president for academic affairs and dean of faculty. Her research focuses on the historical relationship between Christian belief and practice in the American context. Her book, Madness: American Protestant Responses to Mental Illness (Baylor University Press, 2015), explores Protestant reactions to mental illnesses from the colonial era through the 21st century. Her research interests also include American religious history, Reformation church history, practical theology, and theologies of disability and suffering. After working for a decade in corporate positions, Vacek earned an M.Div. and Th.D. from Duke University, Duke Divinity School. Previously, she earned her bachelor's in industrial engineering and bachelor's in economics from Northwestern University; masters in engineering and MBA from Northwestern University, J. L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management. Vacek is ordained in the Moravian Church in America. She is a member of the American Academy of Religion, the American Historical Association, the American Society of Church History, The Conference on Faith and History, the Association of Practical Theology, and the Moravian Historical Society.*

*This sermon was preached at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary Sept. 13, 2012. [Listen to it online: www.pts.edu/Pentecost16.](http://www.pts.edu/Pentecost16)*

# WHAT IN THE WORLD?



# L. Roger Owens

## Associate Professor of Leadership and Ministry

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**H**ere in Easter week, it's worth eavesdropping on the prayer Jesus prayed for his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion, because he knew that after the puzzling events we have just celebrated, his followers would be subject to forces seeking to scatter and destroy them—"fightings without and fears within," as we sometimes sing. Those fightings and fears haven't ended to this day. And so Jesus prays, "As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

And right there is the heart of the mystery Resurrection makes possible. "I am in the Father, the Father is in me, and you can be in us." God's life, this community of love—the love of the Father and the Son for one another in the Spirit—is now opened to us. God's life is not a gated community and we the poor beggars on the outside looking in, futilely hoping to enter. No, God is a roomy, welcoming Inn, with the door wide open in Jesus. In Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson's memorable, if awkward, phrase, "God is participable." He's what Charles Wesley writes about in a hymn to the Holy Spirit when he says he longs to be "Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea, and lost in thine immensity."

"Plunged in the Godhead's deepest sea." The risen Jesus stands at the shore of God's life and says, "Come on in—the water is fine."



But notice—it's not just for our sakes alone. There's another reason Jesus wants us united in him as he is in God: *So the world might believe*. And if you've spent any time reading John's Gospel, you might have asked this question: What in the world does "world" mean in John's Gospel? In these few verses alone Jesus mentions "the world" 17 times—"You gave these disciples to me from the world"; "I am not asking on behalf of the world"; "I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world"; "the world hated them because they do not belong to the world"; "As you have sent me in to the world, so I have sent them into the world"—*what in the world is he talking about?*

One reason it's hard for us to "get" what "world" means in John's Gospel is that we have an understanding of what it means to be *worldly* or to enjoy *worldly things*. Worldly things belong to a certain class we've learned Christians should avoid. And every generation has a different set of things it considers "worldly." Once it included playing cards and going to movies on Sundays. According to the great moral theologian Professor Harold Hill, a.k.a. the Music Man, it includes playing pool. Today I suspect it involves using non recycle-able paper plates, or getting that extra shot of espresso in a whole-milk latte—worldly pleasures. *Worldly.*

But *world* in John's Gospel is much bigger than that—it's a comprehensive category, not a narrow class of vices. "World" is the name for all reality oriented away from the purposes and plans of God. "World" is the reality we're born into. It's the water we swim in. It's the way things are that structures our



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existence and shapes the way we see and live. It's not a few things we need to give up, it's a whole way of existence—a comprehensive reality we need to be pulled out of.

Once we “get” that meaning, we can see “world” as all the forces keeping humans from living into the overarching purposes of God for creation. Racial and ethnic divisions—clearly, “world.” Class divisions. Hyper-nationalism. Economic determinism, in which something called the “economy” shapes how we think and what we do and causes us to see others and the rest of creation as commodities to be bought and sold. *World*. And another as well: a revulsion to weakness and vulnerability that makes us want to hide, keep out of sight—anything that reminds us of the pain and fragility of life.

That's what made people ask whether Pope John Paul II would retire when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Some began to hope he would retire. When a reporter asked him if he thought about retiring, he responded, “There is no such thing as a Pope Emeritus.” (Shows you what *he* knows.) But people still asked, “What in the world is he doing? Why doesn't he retire? What's he doing traipsing around the world with Parkinson's disease, letting people see him stumble, hear him struggle to speak, and watch him waste away. Isn't it time for him to disappear? Do we really have to watch this?” That's “world” speaking. But John Paul new better. He was no longer, as Jesus put it, “of the world.” He'd accepted the resurrection invitation—leave “world” life, enter God life. But he was also still “in the world”—and he needed to let the world see how God's strength is made perfect in weakness. How else would the world believe?



**‘WORLD’ IS THE NAME  
FOR ALL REALITY  
ORIENTED AWAY FROM  
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He also, I suspect, needed to let Christians see that being no longer “of the world”—being invited into the ocean that is God’s life and love—does not mean withdrawal or disengagement. God’s life—the life we enter—is not just an inviting-in life. It’s also a sending-out life. “As you have sent me into the world,” Jesus prays, “so I have sent them into the world.” Called out of the world, sent right back in—or, to use a different ocean image, getting caught in the rip-current of God’s love.

I’m from the Midwest. There we don’t worry about rip-currents. My North Carolinian friends laugh at me when I tell them our annual family vacation was to Indiana Beach in Northern Indiana on the shore of beautiful Lake Shafer. At Indiana Beach we didn’t worry about the current. So the first time my family went to the beach—the real beach—with the kids, and I saw signs warning me about the rip-currents and picturing stick-figure people being swept out to sea, and I saw the lifeguards with their binoculars and their four-wheelers, and the yellow caution flags, I thought to myself, “We’re going to let our kids go in there? What in the world? What if they get dragged out, sent out?”

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

I sometimes think we should have a warning sign on the doors of the church. Shouldn’t we—maybe some yellow caution flags? You’re welcome here—come in here, meet God here, enter God’s love here, but watch out! The rip-currents of God’s love are strong; you might get caught in one, and it will send you right back out—to who knows where?

But we *do* know where. It will send us out to be with and among the people the “world” doesn’t think matter, doesn’t think belong—the weak and the vulnerable. That’s where it will send us.

In my church in Durham—Duke Memorial—we had a lot of small group meetings. Some groups met in homes. Some met at the church. But one year we had a group that didn't meet in a house or at the church. It met on Friday morning at JJ Henderson Towers. Henderson Towers is a public housing facility for very low income seniors. It's one of the places where the world hides the community's weak and vulnerable. But some folks at Duke Memorial stepped into the rip-current, the sending-out current of God's love—and that's where it sent them. So every Friday morning, a small group—half Duke Memorial members, half Henderson Towers residents—started meeting to study the Psalms, to get to know one another and this sending-out God who brought them together.

“As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.”

Recently a new anti-panhandling law in Durham went into effect. It was another picture of “world,” because seeing homeless men and women at intersections and on medians unsettles us, and “world” wants them out of sight. So now the homeless who stand in medians and beg alms get fined \$250 dollars or they go to jail, which means of course they go to jail. But some Christians in Durham got caught in the current of God's love, and they allowed themselves to be sent to the street corners and the medians. One Monday, 40 of these Christians stood



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at intersections where it had recently become illegal to stand. They carried signs that said things like, “Will work for change” and “I was hungry, and you fined me.” They risked fines and arrest and even jail, if that’s where the current was headed.

Surely, churches that worship Jesus should have a signs and yellow flags: “Danger—who knows where you’ll end up if you come in here—maybe even seminary!” “As you have sent me into the world,” Jesus prayed, “so I have sent them into the world.”

As you sent me *into* the world, so I sent them.

Who in the world is he talking about? Who in the world is *them*—so I sent “them”? Who in the world *are* they? To clear up any confusion about who Jesus was talking about, he appeared to his fearful disciples on the day of his resurrection. He appeared to them in a locked room. And he looked in their eyes and said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send . . . .”

*The Rev. Dr. L. Roger Owens is a graduate of Duke University (where he was awarded a Lilly Fellowship for the Formation of a Learned Clergy), Duke Divinity School, and Anderson University in Indiana. Owens is an ordained Elder in the North Carolina Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church. In North Carolina he served both urban and rural churches for eight years as co-pastor with his wife, the Rev. Ginger Thomas, before coming to PTS. His books include Pastoral Work: Engagements with the Vision of Eugene Peterson (edited with Jason Byassee), Abba, Give Me a Word: The Path of Spiritual Direction, Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven’s Earthly Life (edited with Joel Shuman) and The Shape of Participation: A Theology of Church Practices, which was called “this decades best work in ecclesiology” by The Christian Century. Owens serves on the faculty for the Upper Room’s Academy for Spiritual Formation, where he lectures on postmodern spirituality and traditions of Christian spirituality.*

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