

Celebration of Spirit 2020

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At the beginning of every year that Seattle University has existed, even that first year in 1891 in an upstairs parish hall in downtown Seattle, the year has been inaugurated by a Mass of the Holy Spirit. In such changing circumstances of war and peace, depression and prosperity, threat and promise the university has turned to ask from the Holy Spirit a particular gift upon the students, faculty and staff for that year. What gift do we ask from the Spirit in perhaps the most unusual and challenging of all years of being locked down, distanced and threatened by a pandemic; facing at last the absolute need to become anti-racist especially because Black Lives Matter; seeing our environment degrading around us as felt so horribly by the forest fires; and so many students being set back in their excitement about college life and promising futures. What particular gift do we ask from the Holy Spirit for us this year? We ask above all for hope.

The Prophet Ezekiel gives us a vision of hope. a vast plain of white and dry bones, lifeless, scattered. He prophesizes and the bones come rattling together “thigh bone connected to the leg bone” etc. and flesh and sinews coming upon them. They do not yet have life. They are like we are: dried out, desiccated, disjointed, scattered by all that saps us and trying to put ourselves back together as individuals and as a people, not yet fully alive, but weighed down, impeded, not who we can be and want to be. The Prophet Ezekiel says, “but there was no spirit in them.” So he is told by God to prophesy again. He did so

and like the wind the spirit rushed into them and they came alive and stood up, a vast unified people. The people who had been saying “Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, and we are cut off” are now filled with the spirit of life that gives them hope, no longer dried up, no longer cut off from one another and from a future.

Here is the gift of the Spirit we need as we begin this year, hope: hope that we can together make all we are living a source of resilience and growth; hope that we can look beyond our present conditions of school in this quarter to the full years of our education; hope that our country can at last right the wrong of slavery, colonialism, and oppression; hope that we will not let climate change creep up on us till it too late to save the homes of our friends and our common home. Let’s pray for the gift of the Spirit of God prophesized by Ezekiel: hope to stand erect, alive, one. Isn’t hope what we most need in this 129th year of Seattle University?

We need an even greater hope than this. We find it in the gospel we just read. The disciples of Jesus, both men and women, who walked with him in Galilee, came with him to Jerusalem, put all their hopes in him, have their hopes crushed when they fled from him dying in torture upon a cross. Hopes dashed, they are now in a house with locked doors because of their fears that as his disciples they would be taken next. How evocative for us are locked doors – we have them everywhere – and how true to our experience – fears that we may be next, that our country will collapse, that our environment will rage against

us for our abuse of it. Behind locked doors out of fear – do we resonate with that?

Into this locked-in, fearful place, of people of some weak faith huddled together, the one they saw dead, is there, really him, bearing his wounds, saying “Do not be a afraid”; bringing peace and joy to them beyond their imagination. They can hardly believe it: joy beyond sorrow, peace beyond fear, life beyond death. So what does the Risen Christ, newly risen to inextinguishable life do: “He breathed on them and said to them ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.” He is giving them his own spirit. Here is a hope of a different category, a hope that death does not have the last word, but that life does. Here is a hope not just for this quarter or year, or these times, or our lifetime, but hope for life to its fullest beyond death. Do we know at some level of ourselves a fear that only this gift of hope from the spirit of Christ overcomes, not beyond a quarter, or a year, or beyond a country and a world in crisis, but for all times beyond all crises, beyond death itself?

As we open ourselves in this Celebration of Spirit to the hope the Prophet Ezekiel brings to a people like dry bones, let us stretch ourselves to be open also to the gift of hope breathed into us by the Risen Christ. In him is our ultimate hope both in this year when we above all need hope and always.