Pentecost, May 20, 2018
Saint Mark’s Episcopal Church, Little Rock, Arkansas
The Reverend Patricia Matthews

I have a friend who, about 10 years ago, when he was young and newly married, wanted a chicken coop. Now, in his backyard, he had this old shed. It was falling down, probably a wonderful home for wasps and spiders and snakes. But a home for chickens? Not so much. And since his wife and he didn’t have a ton of money - and because of the kind of person he is - he decided to rebuild the shed with scrap wood. He didn’t go to the hardware store and buy a bunch of new wood. He used what others threw away.

He slowly started collecting wood as he drove around town. He would toss pieces in the back of his pick-up truck. He would hammer those pieces onto the shed - and little by little, the coop started to take shape.

I visited him about 6 months after the project began. His wife and he had a party in the back yard. I was astounded. What had been a pile of old, discarded wood had been transformed into a virtual palace for chickens. The varied colors and lengths of wood created what was, almost, abstract art.

And that night, as children played by the coop, and the German Shepherd dog tried to herd the chickens through the chicken wire, and friends relaxed over slow hours, I saw the beauty and the truth in my friend’s approach to salvaging the world, one piece at a time.

Here was an example of how, with a little love and vision, a pile of scrap wood could be made into a home - even if just for some chickens. It is that kind of vision and hope that we need these days. Maybe the world has always needed it.

It was needed when Israel was in exile in Babylon, thousands of years ago. The nation was kind of like a falling-down shed. They were broken, in bondage. Their dreams shattered. Their temple destroyed. And here comes Ezekiel, a man of love and vision, who restores their hope by telling them a story that still captures our imaginations - one of dry bones, scattered and forgotten in the desert, and how God comes along and throws them in the back of God’s pick-up-truck, and, little by little, restores them to something new and beautiful. Those dry bones lived again.

Another story of vision and love that captures the imagination was needed in the days following Jesus’ death and resurrection, when the disciples looked around and felt like a crumbling structure themselves.

Their leader is gone. The Roman Empire and the religious community of the day are against them. They are in exile - and yet - here comes the Holy Spirit, picking up these discarded scraps of the kingdom of God and descending with tongues of fire on their
heads, filling them with truth and power. And there’s more: people start speaking in all languages, breaking down the most basic barrier between people, in an instant.

On this day, over 2000 years ago, on the celebration of Pentecost, God showed this rag-tag team of broken-down disciples that God was still interested and able to redeem what appears to everyone as a hopeless situation.

That same God still exists in the world today. Look at us - God is still choosing us - we, the scrap wood of the world - and God is hammering all of us together in an intricate, abstract construction called The Church. And our job is to keep telling these odd stories, so that we remain the incarnation of the imagination of God. So that today on Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, we get to still be a place full of love and vision for the world, a refuge in which all may seek solace.

A solace based in the integrity and truth that God has remained loyal to humanity over the centuries. God’s love moved over creation, breathed life into dry bones, pulsed through Jesus at his resurrection, and filled the disciples at Pentecost. That love and power and fire is here today as we baptize these children, and from this day forward, Alice, Payne, and Evelyn will be held in it. They will never be separated from it.

The imagination of God is a to constantly take all that is broken and scared and hopeless in the world and breathe into it beauty, and love, and fire. God is still the God who asks us, “Can these bones live?” and then immediately answers “Yes, I will cause breath to enter you and you shall live.”

We are living in a world of dry bones - of a school shooting in Texas, of people dying on the border of Palestine and Israel, of daily anxiety and fear over debt and marriage and children and work - and yes, even in this world, God still is asking us that one, simple question: Can these bones still live?

Well, Church, what do you think?

Do we think that the Creator of Life, the source of fire and power and love, still is here?

The resounding answer is yes. It strengthens us for the trials of life. It fills us with love. And as Presiding Bishop Michael Curry proclaimed yesterday at the Royal Wedding, that love is power, a power like fire, a power that can change any situation in an instant. A power that can change the world.

We get to hold onto that hope. We must. That is our job as the Beloved Community.

Wherever the dry spaces are in our world and in our lives, God still looks at it, still looks at that pile of scrap wood, left lifeless at the bottom of the cross, and says, Yes!