

WGUMC June 18, 2017 "I Believe in the Holy Spirit"  
Ezekiel 37:1-14

*Veni Creator Spiritus, [Come, Creator Spirit]  
mentes tuorum visita, [visit the minds of your people]  
imple superna gratia, [fill with heavenly grace]  
quae tu creasti, pectora. [the hearts that you created]*

This is the first verse of the 9<sup>th</sup> century Latin hymn  
traditionally used at ordinations. A 17<sup>th</sup>-century English  
translation in our hymnal goes like this:

*Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire,  
and lighten with celestial fire.  
Thou the anointing Spirit art,  
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.*

I'm off this week to Annual Conference, the yearly  
gathering of lay people and clergy in Northern California and  
Nevada. The high point of Conference for me is the ordination  
service. I love the part where the Bishop lays her hands on the  
men and women to be ordained and calls down the Holy Spirit  
to empower them in the ministry of Word, Sacrament, and  
Order. Even though ordination is a once-and-for-all event in a  
pastor's life, every year I go to Conference hoping that the

Holy Spirit will pour just a little more of her grace on me and once again lighten my soul with celestial fire.

Boy, I could sure use some of her fire. You may have noticed that I used the pronoun "she." That's because the Hebrew word for spirit is *ruach* and *ruach* is a feminine noun. That's also true in Syriac, which is a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Jesus. Many of the early Christians spoke Syriac and they often referred to the Spirit as Mother just as we often call God Father. When I was in seminary and angry at all the sexism in the church, that image worked for me. I liked the idea of the Trinity being a little family: Father-God, Mother-Spirit and their Son, Jesus. But even if I think of the Holy Spirit as a mother, that doesn't make her any less of a mystery. Who really is she?

One way to understand who the Spirit is would be to look at what the Spirit does. In the Bible, the Spirit is very busy, like most of the mothers I know. Since the beginning of God's

creating, the Spirit has been up to something. [Genesis 1:1]. The Spirit of God breathes into Adam, [Genesis 2:], takes possession of Gideon [Judg 6:34], rushes on Samson [Judg 14:6], and comes mightily on David [I Sam 16:13] and lifts up Ezekiel [Ezek 11:24]. And that's just the Hebrew Bible. In the New Testament, the Spirit of God comes upon Mary [Luke 1:35], fills her cousin Elizabeth [Luke 1:41], descends like a dove on Jesus [Mark 1:10], drives him into the wilderness [Mark 1:12], and anoints him to bring good news to the poor [Luke 4].

But the Spirit is not only active in a few extraordinary people. In the Book of Acts and in the letters, God's Spirit baptizes us [Acts 11:16], intercedes for us [Rom 8:26], sanctifies us [Rom 15:16], testifies to us [Hebrews 10:15]; calls us [Rev 22:17], teaches us [John 14:26], leads us [Gal 5:18], showers gifts upon us [I Cor 12], unites us [Eph 4:3]. In short, God's Spirit lives in us [2 Tim 1:14].

So to believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe in the power and presence of God acting in our world and living in us. If God wants something done anywhere, you can be sure that the Spirit is right there. It's just too bad that so many of us are unaware.

We'd like to believe in the Holy Spirit, but these days it is easier to believe in unholy spirits. That's because there are so many apostles of evil everywhere. And they are always holding press conferences, bring us bad news from the front lines, whether those battlefields are really out in the world or just in our own minds. For that reason, we don't need much of an imagination to be able to see Ezekiel's vision.

The prophet is looking out on a valley full of dry bones and what he sees is pretty much the carcass of his country. The Israelites lost their battle with the King of Babylon and were carted off into exile. They didn't have time to attend to the dead, and so Ezekiel's vision is filled with what might be

flashbacks from the war, living memories of lots of unburied bodies.

I hate to say it, but this gruesome scene reminds me of all the mass shootings in our country: in Alexandria and Orlando, in Charleston and Newtown, in San Bernardino and Oakland, in Roseburg and Aurora, and in so many other places. America the beautiful is turning into America the battlefield. And it is much the same beyond our borders. There's London and Paris, Stockholm and Berlin, Mosul and Kabul, Karachi and Aleppo, Caracas, Honduras, the Philippines, the Ukraine, Congo, Yemen and South Sudan. I'm afraid that if this keeps up, the earth will become one big valley of dry bones.

But where we see relentless death, God sees the raw materials for new life. So God quizzes Ezekiel: "Mortal, can these bones live?" Ezekiel, traumatized by everything he has experienced, only says, "O Lord God, you know." Considering our own situation, how would we answer that question? While

we may not have an answer for Alexandria or Aleppo, we need to have an answer for us. The world is a mess, but the process of cleaning it up has to start with us. Are we going to live or are we going to let the apostles of evil suck the life out of us and leave us for dead in the valley of dry bones?

God answers the question by commanding Ezekiel to prophesy to those bones: "O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live."

God's Holy Spirit is about to get to work. We know that because "breath" and "spirit" are the same word in Hebrew. So whenever you read about the breath of God, you are getting the Spirit of God. Remember in the Book of Genesis, God breathes into Adam the spirit of life. [Gen 2:7] And in the Gospel of John, when the Risen Christ appears to the disciples, he breathes the Spirit into them, giving them new life. [John 20:22]

What that tells me is that without the Spirit of God breathing into us, none of us can live. We might have a pulse. We might have brain function, but we won't be truly alive. And don't we want that energy, that hope, that joy, that passion and sense of purpose, that healing and wholeness, that assurance of love, that promise of peace? And it frustrates us to think how long we have been waiting to feel this alive.

More of us would believe in the Holy Spirit if we could accept the fact that real life doesn't happen all at once. When Ezekiel prophesied to the bones, there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. But they still weren't alive. And when the sinew and flesh came upon them and skin covered them, even then, there was no breath in them. Ezekiel had to prophesy to the breath and only then did those bones live.

In Ezekiel's vision is our lesson. At some point in our adulthood we are going to come to a place where we are the

dry bones left on the battlefields of life. Some of us will have no sinew, no flesh, and our skin will have been stripped away. And even for those of us who will appear to be perfectly healthy, there will still be no breath in us.

The new life that Jesus promises us and the Spirit gives to us, will come, but it can be a slow process. Yet it isn't all that complicated. In fact, it's as easy as breathing. So listen to your meditation teacher: Focus on your breath. For when we focus on our breath, we become more aware of the one thing that is even closer to us than breathing. We become more aware of and we begin to sink deeper into the presence of God.

If we want out of the valley of dry bones, all we have to do is remember to breathe. If we breathe, we will receive. If we receive, we will begin to live. By the grace of God, this is what we believe.

In that belief, I am going to Conference this week. I will be staying not at the Hyatt where the meetings are being held,



but at the Mercy Center, a Catholic Retreat Center a few miles away, because I need a place where you can practice breathing, a place that will remind me what you really do believe. Then I will go to the ordination service, wishing you all could be there. For while only a few are ordained to the clergy, all of us are ordained to life. And I want nothing more for you than what the Holy Spirit is ready to breathe in you: abundant life. Come, Holy Spirit, come!