

“LIFE THROUGH THE HOLY SPIRIT”

Ezekiel 37:1-14

He is the Third Person of the Trinity, coequal with God the Father and God the Son in power and glory, wisdom and majesty; uncreated and eternal. He was with the Father and Son at the creation of the universe. **“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the *Spirit of God* was hovering over the waters,”** Genesis 1:1-2. The Hebrew word translated as hovering in that verse, MERACHÉPHETH, literally means “to brood over,” as a hen brooding over her eggs; nesting, incubating, life-giving.

He was also present with the Father and Son at the baptism of Jesus: **“As soon as Jesus was baptized, He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and He saw the *Spirit of God* descending like a dove and lighting on Him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased,’”** Matthew 3:16-17.

He is prominent in both the Old Testament and New Testament. Judges 14:19 states of mighty Samson, **“Then the *Spirit of the LORD* came upon him in power.”** Or Job 33:4, **“The *Spirit of God* has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”** Or Zechariah 4:6 and the seemingly impossible task of rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem after the Babylonian Captivity—a once glorious temple, now destroyed and lying in ashes and ruins. How could this monumental task be accomplished? God answered: **“ ‘Not by might nor by power, but by *My Spirit,*’ says the LORD Almighty.”**

New Testament references to the Holy Spirit are even more extensive. Romans 8:26, **“In the same way, *the Spirit* helps us in our weakness.”** Or 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, **“No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him’—but God has revealed it to us by *His Spirit.*”** Or Galatians 5:16, **“So I say, live by *the Spirit,* and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”** Or as Jesus said in John 14:26, **“But the Counselor, *the Holy Spirit,* whom the Father will send in My name will teach you all things and will remind you everything I have said to you.”**

And not only is the Holy Spirit prominent in the Old and New Testaments, the Holy Spirit is responsible for the Old and New Testaments; as stated in 2 Peter 1:21, **“For prophecy never had its origin in the will of men, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by *the Holy Spirit*.”** The Holy Spirit gave the prophets and apostles the very words they wrote in Scripture. This is why every word of Scripture is the very word of God. This is always why Scripture has so many important uses for our lives; from leading us to salvation to healing a troubled marriage. Paul told the Thessalonians: **“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe,”** 1 Thessalonians 2:13.

And yet the Holy Spirit, has been called “the forgotten member of the Trinity; and this when everything we are, everything we have, and everything we will inherit as Christians is due solely to the work of the Holy Spirit. Listen again to Luther’s explanation of the Third Article of the Apostolic Creed: “I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith; even as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith.”

Your faith in Jesus Christ, dear Christian friend, is no less of a miracle than the way Jesus calmed the raging storm on Lake Galilee; or fed thousands from scraps; or opened the eyes of the blind; or raised dead and decaying Lazarus from the grave. Your faith in Jesus is a miracle of the Holy Spirit. This is what Scripture declares: **“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit,”** 1 Corinthians 12:3.

Today is Pentecost, and Pentecost celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the New Testament Church. Pentecost means ‘fiftieth.’ The first Pentecost occurred fifty days after the first Easter. However, the first Pentecost also occurred during the Old Testament *Feast of Weeks*. God commanded in Deuteronomy 16:9, **“Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the LORD your God by giving a freewill offering in proportion to the blessings the LORD your God has given you.”**

The *Feast of Weeks* then was a celebration of the harvest. Was it a coincidence that the first Pentecost, the outpouring of God’s Spirit, occurred during the Old Testament celebration of the harvest? Was it a coincidence that Jesus died during the Jewish Passover, on the very day, at the very hour, when households throughout Israel

were sacrificing their own paschal lamb? No. Jesus died during the Passover because Jesus was the true Lamb of God to which the Old Testament Passover had always pointed. And Pentecost occurred during the Old Testament *Feast of Weeks* because it inaugurated the Final Harvest of the World through the word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

We're all familiar with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Acts 2:1-21; how the Spirit of God enabled poor, unschooled fisherman from Galilee to speak in languages they had never learned. Real languages; not the nonsensical gibberish, the so-called "speaking in tongues," imagined by the Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches. Utterly amazed, the crowds in Jerusalem that first Pentecost asked, "**Are not all these men Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own language,**" Acts 2:7-8.

Only, what does the outpouring of God's Spirit on Pentecost have to do with us? Just this: You and I were brought to faith in Jesus through the very same word of God and the very same Holy Spirit. The tongues of fire on the heads of the disciples symbolized the tongues in their mouths which the Holy Spirit set on fire to preach Jesus. "**Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel,**" Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 9:16.

Thanks to the Holy Spirit, that very same word of God—the word about Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior—has crossed thousands of years and thousands of miles; has crossed gaps in ethnicity, gender, social status, and wealth; has conquered kingdoms and conquered hearts; has gone from ancient Jerusalem in Israel to modern Lemmon in South Dakota, where today we celebrate Pentecost, May 31, 2020. We celebrate the life-giving Holy Spirit. "**The Spirit gives life,**" Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:6. And where is the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit more graphically illustrated than in Ezekiel 37:1-14; the Valley of Dry Bones?

This text is familiar to us—if for no other reason than being the source of the old African-American spiritual *Dem Bones*. A song set to music in the early 1900s and recorded by such artists as Rosemary Clooney, Tennessee Ernie Ford, even Alvin and the Chipmunks. A song often used to teach children the basics of anatomy: "Toe bone connected to the foot bone. Foot bone connected to the heel bone. Heel bone connected to the ankle bone." And so on, from toe bone to shin bone to hip bone to head bone.

However, the true significance of this text can only be seen in its historical context. The Book of Ezekiel was written during the dark, hopeless years of the Babylonian Captivity. Ezekiel's particular calling was to both warn and encourage the Israelites in captivity. Humanly speaking, this must have seemed like an impossible undertaking.

From the outset God warned Ezekiel: **“The people to whom I am sending you are obstinate and stubborn,”** Ezekiel 2:4. You’ll have to read Ezekiel to understand why, but as part of his ministry Ezekiel was told to shave his head with a sword; to lie on his left side for three-hundred and ninety days; and to pack his bags and dig through a wall. As part of his ministry and message to Israel, Ezekiel even lost his wife; though he was not permitted to mourn for her. Some ministry. Had God issued such a call to me, I may well have said, “Um, no thanks, Lord. I think I’ll do something more cheerful, like working at a funeral home.”

Or consider the hopelessness of the Jewish exiles themselves; how the once proud and free people of God were now slaves, hundreds of miles from home: their promised land, occupied; their loved ones killed; their beloved Jerusalem in ruins and flames; their holy temple—the visible dwelling of God’s Presence with His chosen people—completely destroyed. This was the utter hopelessness to which their sins and rebelliousness against God had brought them.

Notice the graphic way this utter hopelessness was portrayed to Ezekiel. Not a small boneyard, but a valley filled with bones. Not assembled skeletons, but fractured, broken, disjunct, and scattered bones. Not fresh bones, but bones that were baked dry and bleached white by the merciless desert sun. The image is one of absolute hopelessness, helplessness, and lifelessness. **“Son of man,”** said God, **“these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off,’** Ezekiel 37:11.

Oh, how many of us haven’t said the same? “My marriage is failing. All hope is gone.” “My health is failing. All hope is gone.” “My finances are failing. All hope is gone.” “My faith is failing. All hope is gone.” “The coronavirus is spreading. All hope is gone.” Periodically, all of us will find ourselves walking through that dry, dusty boneyard of broken hopes, broken dreams, broken hearts, broken homes, and broken promises. And when we do, God will ask us the same question He asked Ezekiel: **“Son of man, can these bones live?”** Can there be hope amid hopelessness, joy amid sorrow, life amid death?

What will our answer be? To his credit, at least Ezekiel did not say, “Well, God, the situation looks rather hopeless to me. I mean, dried bones. Disconnected bones. Bleached-out bones. Bones scattered everywhere. God, this is such a terrible mess, I doubt if even You could connect the toe bone to the heel bone; and the heel bone to the foot bone; and the foot bone to the leg bone; and the leg bone to the knee bone.” Ezekiel of course did not say such a thing; but if he had, God’s answer most certainly would have been: “O, yes I can.”

“Prophesy to these bones,” said the LORD, **“and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the LORD. This is what the Sovereign LORD says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life,’”** Ezekiel 37:5. And in verses 11-14, **“Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up and our hope is gone; we are cut off.’ Therefore prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: O My people, I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them; I will bring you back to the land of Israel. Then you, My people, will know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. *I will put My Spirit in you and you will live, and I will settle you in your own land. Then you will know that I the LORD have spoken, and I have done it, declares the LORD.*”**

Can God bring life to even the most hopeless of situations? Of course He can. And how does He do it? Through the life-giving Holy Spirit, who works through the Scriptures. Six times the word ‘prophesy’ is used in today’s text. This is important. Those dead, dry bones only came to life when Ezekiel spoke the word of God to them; the word through which the Holy Spirit connected the bones in the right way, and covered the bones with ligaments and tendons and skin, and changed the dead, dry bones into living, breathing people ready to do battle in the name of the Lord. And life and hope would come to the captive Israelites in exactly the same way: **“*Prophesy and say to them,*”** God told Ezekiel. **“Speak the word of God to them.”**

Who is it that fills us with life? Who is it that empowers us to go on when we don’t have the strength or will to go on? Who is it that creates hope when there is no hope? Who is it that puts together the disjointed parts of our lives and makes us truly whole again? It is the Holy Spirit of God, working through the word of God. This is the lesson of today’s text.

On the first Pentecost more than three thousand people came to believe in Jesus as their Savior. Talk about church growth. How did this happen? Was it because Peter had such a dynamic personality? Was it because Peter was a particularly eloquent speaker? Was it because Peter was such a tremendous marketer or advertiser or neighborhood-canvasser? No. It was because Peter had been filled with the Holy Spirit and moved to speak about God.

Life comes from the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit works through the word of God. If this is the lesson of the dry bones, and it is; if this is the significance of Pentecost, and it is; and if this is the way the Holy Spirit chooses to work, and it is; then, do I really need to stress the importance of hearing the word of God? Do I really

need to tell you where to turn for hope when you feel hopeless and for life when you feel lifeless?

Paul wrote to young pastor Timothy: ‘All Scripture is given by inspiration of God,’ 2 Timothy 3:16. Do you know what that word “inspiration” means? It means “breathed into,” the same way God breathed life into Adam and life into those dead, dry bones. **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God made be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”**

The young boy asked the pastor, “Pastor, how come you always bow your head and close your eyes when you go up to the pulpit?” “That’s pulpit, Johnny,” said the pastor. “And when you see me at the pulpit, with my eyes closed and head bowed, I’m praying to God.” “Ahuh,” said Johnny. “And what’cha praying for, pastor?” The pastor replied, “I’m praying that the Holy Spirit would help me preach a good sermon.” Johnny was quiet for a moment and then said, “Well, it isn’t working, pastor. Maybe you should pray harder.”

I’ve prayed the same many times. And you know what I’ve finally learned? By God’s definition, preaching a “good sermon” has nothing to do with grammatical construction or voice inflection or animated hand gestures. The men who preached that first Pentecost were simple fisherman. Instead, preaching a good sermon means preaching the word of God in its truthfulness and letting the Holy Spirit do the rest.

If we as Christians want to “breathe life” into our hopeless nation, the answer is not to form a Political Action Committee. The answer is to share the word of God and let the Holy Spirit do His work. If we as Christians are struggling with a troubled marriage or troubled conscience, the answer is not to surrender but to share the word of God and let the Holy Spirit do His work.

If we as Christians are worried about dear friends or loved ones who have turned away from the faith, the answer is not to lose hope or to lose sleep, but to share the word of God and let the Holy Spirit do His work. If we as a Christians are concerned about the growth of our congregation, the answer is not to give up but to go on sharing the word of God and let the Holy Spirit do His work.

“Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones.” Whatever dem dry bones are: “Hear the word of the Lord. And live.