

A sermon preached on Pentecost Sunday, May 19, 2024
at Trinity Episcopal Church, Wethersfield, CT by The Rt. Rev. Gordon P. Scruton

Ezekiel 37:1-14. Psalm 104:25-35, 37. Acts 2:1-21. John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15
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How aware are you of the Holy Spirit flowing in and through your life?

Many Christians experience a connection with God as Father/Creator of all things in the universe. Most Christians know the Gospel stories of Jesus and value his teachings, his example and the awesome power of his life, death and resurrection.

Yet many Christians don't really know or experience or understand the Holy Spirit. The Spirit seems to be the most neglected member of the Trinity. Some Christians spend their whole lives trying to understand and live up to the teachings of Jesus, but inwardly, they feel like they have missed something. They feel a spiritual emptiness or disconnect in the core of their being.

At times we all feel like the first disciples as they watched Jesus ascend into heaven and leave them alone on this earth. How could they communicate with Jesus when he was no longer with them in person? They didn't have his phone number or e-mail address!

Yet Jesus promised in today's Gospel, I will send you the Holy Spirit to be with you always and to guide you into all truth. How do we get to know and experience this Holy Spirit they wondered?

Jesus told his disciples, go back to Jerusalem to wait and pray, and I will send the Holy Spirit to be with you always. The same Holy Spirit power that raised Christ from the dead was poured into the disciples on Pentecost. And the same Holy Spirit has flowed into the lives of people ever since. It's just that we are often not open to or aware of how the Holy Spirit works in and through our lives.

When we were conceived in our mother's womb, the Spirit of God began to form us in the image of God. At birth, the Spirit breathed our first breath into us. The Spirit was not given to us because we were so good or perfect. God gives each person the gift of the Holy Spirit because God loves us, loves each person God sends into the world

When we are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are given another transfusion of the Holy Spirit. When we are Confirmed, whenever we pray, when we receive Holy Communion, when we reflect on the Scripture and gather with other Christians, when we serve the needs of people in need around us, in all these ways we open ourselves to receive fresh transfusions of the Holy Spirit to renew, guide and strengthen us and people around us.

When we delight in a beautiful sun rise or sun set; when we are in awe of mountains or a body of water, when the aroma and beauty of flowers catches our attention, when music and dance and stories move our souls, we are sensing the Holy Spirit flowing through creation and flowing through us, inviting us to delight in being part of God's awesome, interconnected, interdependent gift of life.

The Spirit gives each of us gifts, abilities, passions. When we do what God's Spirit created us to be and do, we often experience the delight and fulfillment of the Holy Spirit flowing through us,

even though we may not recognize it as the Holy Spirit. The heartbeat of what it means to be a follower of Jesus is to keep experiencing, recognizing and being guided by the vibrant power of God's Holy Spirit flowing through us in our daily lives

Today we are celebrating the Spirit's work in igniting the birth of the Church. Notice, the church was not the creation of the first disciples. After Christ ascended into heaven, the disciples did not have a committee meeting and decide how to start a church for Jesus' followers. They did not develop a business plan, make bylaws, raise money to start the church.

From Pentecost and down through the centuries, it is the Holy Spirit who ignites and energizes the Church, which has always been made up of very imperfect people, like you and me, in very different places and cultures. And the Spirit weaves God's people into communities through their shared experience of Christ's loving Spirit who desires to work through them to bring God's healing love, God's justice, God's peace into the world.

Yet too often we don't recognize or welcome this life-giving gift of the Holy Spirit into the active center of our daily lives. It is like God putting a million dollars in our bank account and yet we are dying of starvation because we never draw upon the resource of the Holy Spirit God has given us.

Why? Perhaps we're too busy and distracted. Perhaps we find it difficult to trust that the Holy Spirit can and will guide our lives given all the personal and global problems that bombard us every day. How can the Spirit guide us when things are at their worst?

We get a vision of how the Spirit can work in the worst of situations in the story of the valley of dry bones. God spoke to Ezekiel at one of the lowest points in the history of the people of Israel. The Assyrian armies had invaded Israel in 587 BCE, captured the city of Jerusalem, destroyed the walls and the temple of Jerusalem which was the center around which whole Jewish religion and society was focused. It was destroyed and became a wasteland after the Assyrian army deported all the political and religious leaders, including Ezekiel, to Babylon. How do you live when the institutional and geographical structure of your faith and identity is destroyed and you are living in a different country that follows a different religion?

In this depressing, seemingly hopeless historical context, Ezekiel was living in Babylon, not knowing what the future would hold. Then very unexpectedly, the Spirit of God came to Ezekiel in his despair and gave him a vision of a valley filled with dry bones. The Spirit asked him, can these bones live? Ezekiel wisely answered, O Lord God, you know. I don't know.

The Spirit then said to Ezekiel, "Say to these dead, dry bones: hear the word of the Lord. God says, I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord."

So, as the Spirit directed him, Ezekiel spoke to the vision of the dry bones, and miraculously, gradually, the flesh and connective tissue began to grow on the bones bringing them together, restoring the bodies. Then the breath or Spirit came into them and they lived, and stood on their feet a vast multitude.

Then the Spirit interpreted the meaning of this vision to Ezekiel: Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say: our bones are dried up and our hope is lost; we are cut off

completely. But Ezekiel, you need to tell your people that God says, I'm going to open up your graves and bring new life out of what seems like a dead end. I will put my spirit in you and you shall live, and you shall know that I am the Lord. I have spoken and I will act.

The vision God gave to Ezekiel was not fulfilled overnight. It took time. Yet eventually, in miraculous ways, without any violence, without any attempt to escape or put pressure on the Babylonian government, the armies of a Persian king conquered Babylon. Then the new king, Cyrus, invited the Jewish people to return to the land of Israel. The king even gave them money and supplies to rebuild their temple and the walls of Jerusalem, in fulfillment of Ezekiel's vision.

Do you see the powerful role of the Spirit in this vision and the amazing work of God emerging out of this depressing season in the history of Israel?

We are living in a time when many Americans, when people in nations all around the world feel like we are all living in a valley of dry bones. God created us to love God and our neighbors in the power of the Spirit, yet it feels like we've lost this love of God and neighbor which is source of the connective tissue of mutual respect, gentle care and gratitude for the gift of each person, and the gift of our shared life on this planet.

Can the dry, self-focused bones of our nation and world have any hope for a future? Can Spirit inspired communities of faith, hope and love keep flourishing in North America and around the world? As Ezekiel answered, only God knows the answer in these seemingly hopeless situations.

What if God wants to remind us on this Pentecost, that, even with all the dry bones, all the hopeless destruction and death we see around us and around the world, even with all our feelings of despair and hopelessness for the future, God's Spirit is still at work, like an underground artesian well, preparing to bring about a new creation?

What if the Holy Spirit wants to work through each of us here, through every person on the planet, and is waiting, longing for us not to be overwhelmed with the problems of the world, but instead to keep opening ourselves up each day to receive constant guidance and transfusions of God's Spirit of love...and then to let that Spirit flow through us to touch the lives of every person we come in contact with, every task we do, every day?

What if every morning this week, you intentionally give thanks to God for the gift of a new day and ask the Holy Spirit to guide every thought, word and action of your day?

What if you pause often during each day to check in with the Spirit asking, am I being and doing what you want me to be doing, so your love can flow into the world through me right now?

What if at the end of each day we pause to ask the Holy Spirit to help us review the day: in what ways did I see and experience the Holy Spirit flowing through me, guiding my life? And we offer our thanks for the gift of the Spirit at work around us in the day.

Then we can ask: today, when was I least aware, least responsive to the Holy Spirit? We are all beginners in listening to the Spirit of God and letting the Spirit guide our moment by moment lives. So we need to be patient with ourselves, as God is patient with us. Even at the end of a day in which we have felt largely disconnected from the Spirit, we can still thank the Spirit for being with us through

the day and ask that tomorrow, the Spirit will help us stay more aware and open to whatever the Spirit of Love wants to do through us.

Let's close our eyes and be still in the presence of the Holy Spirit...

Have you begun to catch a fresh glimpse of what a positive difference the Holy Spirit can make in your life and in the whole world?

In the silence, let us give thanks to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit, God's love who is with us always. And let us remember and give thanks for our experiences of God's Spirit...

Next, let's ask God to give us a fresh transfusion of the Holy Spirit while we are here this morning, right now...

Finally, let's ask the Holy Spirit: what changes do you want me to make in my life this week so I can become more aware of and responsive to your presence and guidance in my life?...

O Holy Spirit, this week, help us all be more aware and open to allow your love to flow into and out through our lives into the people and situations around us, so that through us, and through so many other people around the world, your new creation of love may emerge out of the dry bones of our time in history. Amen.