

## Creed: The Holy Spirit

*The hand of the LORD came upon me, and he brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones.*

*He led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry.*

*He said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O Lord GOD, you know."*

*Then he said to me, "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.*

*Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: 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 I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone.*

*I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them.*

*Then he said to me, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live."*

*I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.*

*Then he said to me, "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.'*

*Therefore prophesy, and say to them, Thus says the Lord GOD: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.*

*And you shall know that I am the LORD, when I open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people.*

*I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken and will act," says the LORD.*

Today we are continuing our series on the Apostles' Creed. So far we have talked about how believing in God changes how we see everything— God is love, and we can see everything through the lens of God's love. And last week, we talked about how Jesus is the perfect expression of God's love for us, and that believing in Jesus helps us to serve our neighbors and to see abundance where others see scarcity.

Today, as we talk about the Holy Spirit, we are confronted by a stark vision of scarcity.

The people of God are captives in Babylon. Their homes have been destroyed, their communities broken, and they are now strangers in a strange land. They are survivors, but they are exiles—cut off from all they ever knew and loved. Now they are the slaves of a hostile empire, surrounded by unfamiliar customs and language, and confronted by uncaring Babylonian gods.

One of these survivors, these exiles, is the prophet Ezekiel. As a prophet, he listens for the holy spirit of God for guidance. Ezekiel not only depends on the spirit as a source of wisdom, Ezekiel depends on the spirit for life—he knows that every breath he takes is a gift from God, because each breath is given to us by God. He knows that as long as there is breath in his lungs, he can offer praise to God. But in the midst of exile, in the shackles of slavery, he isn't so sure. He has heard the cries of the people crying out to God: "Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

And so God's spirit appears to Ezekiel in a vision.

The spirit of God leads Ezekiel to the valley of dry bones—to the place where the spirit appears absent, a place marked by thirst, a place of exhaustion, and a place full of reminders of death and loss.

The holy spirit guides the prophet through the valley, all around the bones—and the prophet, to his credit, doesn't shy away from this scene. He notices how many bones there are, he notices how dry they are. There are very many, and they are very dry.

The bones are meant to represent the people of God, the community of faith. Can these bones live again? That's the question God asks Ezekiel. "Only you know," replies the prophet.

It's easy to imagine this valley full of dry bones. It is a place devoid of signs of life. It is a place full of reminders of pain and loss. What comes to mind, when you hear about the very many, very dry, bones?

When I think of the valley of dry bones, I remember visiting a group of small green hills in an open field in Germany—the mass graves of Auschwitz concentration camp.

And I think of a field of empty chairs on a hillside next to a still reflecting pool in Oklahoma City—the memorial for the victims of the Oklahoma City bombing.

When I imagine the very many, very dry bones, I think of all those who have been touched by violence and separation—like those who were injured and killed in acts of racism and hatred in Charlottesville yesterday.

When I imagine Ezekiel's valley, I think of all those who are living with reminders of pain and loss—those who feel like their bones are dried up, like their hope is gone—those who feel cut off from life and love. Those who are wondering, "can these bones, these bones right here, with their aches and pains, these bones that have let me down—can they live again?"

It's easy to imagine the valley of dry bones—it's more difficult to imagine them coming to life. Is it possible? We aren't sure, but given how many bones there are, and how dry they are—it seems pretty hopeless. Given how much hatred and violence and fear there is in the world, we aren't sure that we can ever have a restored community. We aren't sure, so our voice echoes the prophet—"O Lord God, you know."

But it is there, right to the middle of the valley of the shadow of death, where the spirit lead the prophet Ezekiel, and its where the spirit leads us.

God commands the prophet to speak to the bones, to the individuals and to the community—to tell them that they will be restored. By the power of God's spirit, the bones will become connected and protected and new life will be breathed into them. The spirit will restore the bones, the people of faith, and give them the ability to know God. The work of the spirit will bring new life.

The work of the spirit is slow, deliberate, sometimes painful, work. The prophet speaks in the valley, he speaks to the unhearing, unthinking, and unfeeling bones. The spirit breathes, the bones shake and rattle and start coming together. The spirit breathes, creaking and cracking, muscle and ligament appears to hold the bones together. The spirit breathes, new flesh appears and the bodies stand. The spirit breathes, and that breath brings life to the very many, very dry bones—the spirit of God is not just swirling around them, it's within them—a community is created and sustained by the very breath of God.

The community of faith was battered and broken. The people of God were weary and worn out—they were cut off from each other, from who they are, and the source of their identity. And in this vision of Ezekiel, the spirit restores them to life.

The spirit brings new life, the people have hope because God makes life out of death. The spirit breathes life into them. Even in a community that thought it was dead and buried the Spirit of God is breaking open their graves and is in every breath they take.

That's what it means for us to say, with the breath of God empowering our voices: "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

At the very foundation of our belief in the Holy Spirit is trusting that the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is an outpouring of God's love. Every breath we take is a precious gift. God sustains us—from our very first breath to the last breath we take and beyond.

God's spirit blows upon us, and our weary bones find rest. The spirit blows through our lives, and we find a source of peace that runs deeper than any spring or fountain. The spirit blows into our lives and our hearts catch fire. The breath of the Spirit moves around and within us today, bringing life.

Even in the valley of dry bones the spirit breathes life. We see signs of the slow, deliberate, sometimes painful work of the spirit.

At the mass graves of the concentration camps, I am reminded of German pastor and theologian Dietrich Boenhoeffer who spoke out against the rise of Nazism in Germany and who was executed for his opposition. He wrote that, "Just as our love for God begins with listening to God's Word, the beginning of love for others is learning to listen to them . . . We do God's work for our brothers and sisters when we learn to listen to them." The spirit breathes, and bones shake and rattle and come together.

At the memorial in Oklahoma City, you can listen to the voices of those who suffered that day. You can listen to the stories of victims and first responders, and hear how healing happens when a community comes together to support those who suffer with acts of compassion. The spirit breathes, and muscles begin to form.

In Charlottesville, you can listen to the voices of clergy from different denominations and different faiths as they lock arms and sing "This Little Light of Mine" in the face of violence and death threats. The Spirit breathes, and skin stretches and protects the vulnerable.

Just like the prophet Ezekiel—we are called to offer love in the midst of the dry valley. We are given the message of God's vision for restoration. The spirit breathes, and new life appears. We are the ones who have the breath of God in our lungs—let's use it! Let's use it to join in the spirit's slow, deliberate work. Let's use it to offer praise and thanksgiving with every breath we take. Let's use it to speak truth to power and love to hate. Let's speak out against evil and fear. Let's breathe deep and grow in our trust of God. Let's sing out a new song, a song that will echo across Valley View, all the way to the Valley of the dry bones—a song of gladness, a song of peace. Whether we are lying in green pastures, besides still waters, or in the valley of the shadow of death—let's offer the words of God for all who need to hear them this day—I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. You. Shall. Live.