

8 June 2003
Festival of Pentecost

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

“The Spirit of Life”

Text: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Acts 2:22-36; John 7:37-39a

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Nicene Creed, which we will confess again immediately after this sermon, we say, “*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.*” Did you ever think about that statement, and what we are saying by it?

So many people in our world today are searching for life. They want a *full* life, and so they fill their lives with all kinds of things, and activities, and busy-ness. They want a *meaningful* life, and so strive for importance and significance, to make themselves feel needed. And they want a *long* life, and so look to medicine and technology and exercise to prolong their days. . . . Yet in these and other ways, despite all of our best efforts, life continues to frustrate and elude most people. Young, seemingly healthy people die. We find out that the world can go on without us just fine. And people are working so hard at living that they sometimes work and live themselves to death.

But in the Nicene Creed, we confess where our source of life is; that there is only one source of life; there is only one “*Lord and giver of life.*” The Spirit of God which hovered over the waters at creation to create and give life is the One still giving life today. And what the Holy Spirit makes alive is truly alive; and apart from Him there is no life. And the life that He gives is full, and meaningful, and eternal.

The problem is, that just as the Holy Spirit cannot be seen, so also the life that He gives also often cannot be seen. In fact, it is often hidden – hidden under what *appears* to be the *very opposite* of life and good living. Hidden under struggle; hidden under pain; hidden even under death. . . . But we tend to believe what we see, don’t we? And so we have a paradox here. **For what the world thinks is being alive and living, God calls dead; and what the world thinks is dead, God calls alive.**

And so as we confess in the Nicene Creed, life, true life, is a matter of faith. Something that we must believe, despite what our eyes may tell us. “*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.*”

And so that we might believe this, we heard this evening about God’s Spirit of life, and

His giving of life. First, from the prophet Ezekiel – the valley of dry bones. Dry bones are dead bones. Dead as dead can be. And not only dead, but dead a long time. . . . ***“Son of Man, can these bones live?”*** Ezekiel’s eyes may tell him no, but to God he cannot say no, so he says, ***“O God, you know.”*** And yes, God does know. And so He tells Ezekiel to prophesy, to speak the Word of God, to those bones. And at God’s Word, they come together, they re-form, they are, should we say, born again? . . . But no life. Not yet. ***“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.”*** And so God sends His breath to these bones. Breath – the same word translated also as wind, and also as *spirit*. The same word used of God’s Spirit in Genesis at creation. ***“The Lord and giver of life”*** gives life to these dry bones. **And what the world calls dead, God calls – and makes – alive.**

And then we heard from the Apostle Peter, his Pentecost sermon. A sermon about Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead and buried. Dead as dead can be. Three days in the tomb. On Sunday, the women went to anoint a dead body with spices. The disciples were making plans to cope with this and move on. *Can these bones live?* . . . Peter points to the Psalms of David for the answer, where God’s Word says that indeed, not only can they, but they will! And on Easter, they did! ***“This [crucified, dead, and buried] Jesus God raised up,”*** Peter proclaims, ***“and of that we are all witnesses.”*** And then later, in his First Epistle, Peter explains this further: ***“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.”*** (1 Pt. 3:18 NKJV) ***“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life.”*** **And what the world called dead, God calls – and makes – alive.**

And then we heard Jesus speaking to the crowd in the Holy Gospel – speaking at the Feast of Tabernacles and promising ***“living water.”*** Now, you have to understand a little about that Feast to understand what Jesus is saying here. For part of the Feast of Tabernacles was a ceremony of drawing water. And with the water drawing, the people would remember a number of things: they would remember the goodness of God in sending rain; they would remember the goodness of God in providing water for His people in the Exodus – even water out of a rock! And then they also remembered the promise of God to send His Holy Spirit to them, calling the Spirit ***“the water from the well of salvation.”*** (Is. 12:3) . . . And so in that context it is that Jesus stands up and proclaims, ***“If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.”*** And there was no other way to interpret what Jesus was saying: He is the source of the water; He is the source of the Holy Spirit; He is the source of life; He is God. And out of His side ***“will flow rivers of living water.”*** Not a little trickle, but *rivers*. Enough for all, to give life to all, to give His Spirit to all.

And when Jesus is crucified, these words come true. When Jesus bows His head in

death, a soldier's spear pierces His side, and out of His side flowed water and blood. (John 19:34) And far more than just an extraordinary physical occurrence – it is symbolic of how Christ now gives His Spirit, the living water, to His Church; how we receive the benefits of Christ's death and resurrection, His forgiveness and new life. It is through His water and blood that flow from His cross and which lead us back to His cross – the water of His Baptism, the blood of His Supper. **And the One the world called dead, has become the source of life for all who believe!**

And so now, in the Church, when we ask ***“Can these bones live?”*** we know that they can! For here is the Spirit, the living water, *“the Lord and giver of life,”* given to all who thirst. To all of us who are dry, dead bones. To all in need of life.

+ And so here, newborn babies, who *look* alive and innocent, but who in God's eyes are born dead in trespasses and sins, are raised from the dead and given new life by the Spirit, *“the Lord and giver of life,”* in Holy Baptism.

+ Here, us sinners, who may *look* alive and successful, but who in God's eyes are dead in sin, are raised from the dead and given new life by the Spirit, *“the Lord and giver of life,”* through God's Word of absolution, or forgiveness.

+ Here we, who may *look* alright on the outside, but who are dried up by the world, by persecution, by struggles, by difficulties, by pain, by doubts and fears and worries, by unbelief and sorrow – here we are given faith and strength and new life by the Spirit, *“the Lord and giver of life,”* in Holy Communion, as we eat the body and drink the blood of our Saviour Jesus Christ, receiving all that He is and all that He has for us.

And this is the life that you received, and continue to receive – when you were baptized, when you hear the Word of God, when your sins are forgiven, when the body and blood of Christ are placed into your mouth. For you receive the Spirit of life through these means, and you live. For the life that you need, that you seek, that you are thirsting for, is here given to you. A *full life*, filled not with the things of this world, but filled with Christ and His love. A *meaningful life*, given not just the temporary significance of position or importance in this world, but given the status and position of sons of God. And a *long life*, not guaranteed to reach a ripe old age on earth, but guaranteed to live for eternity in Heaven.

That is the life that has been given to you, and is yours *even now*. Even if you don't *feel* particularly alive; even if you don't *feel* any different; even if it seems that others are more “alive” than you. Remember, **what the world calls dead, God calls alive**. And you are alive in Christ.

And that is what we celebrate today, on this day of Pentecost. We celebrate not just the sending and giving of the Holy Spirit as an historical event which took place some 2,000 years ago. We celebrate that the Holy Spirit, whom Christ has poured out upon His Church, is still in His Church, still active, still giving life, still saving, still forgiving, still raising dry bones, still quenching the thirst of all who are thirsting for life. Today, we celebrate that “*the Lord and giver of life*” has come to us and given us life!

But even as we celebrate, we know that this life is not just for us, but for all. And how many today are walking around as dry bones? Searching for life; tired and frustrated; lifeless, hopeless? “***Can those bones live?***” We know that they can! And so Christ has put us here in this place, as His Church, not only to receive but also to give His living water, to give His Spirit through Word and Sacrament. To reach out and proclaim to all the source of living water, the source of life. That as we drink they too may drink, and drinking they may thirst no more and may find the life we all so desperately need – the life of Christ, given for them . . . for us . . . for all.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.