

## *The Gift of the Holy Spirit*

### **Third in a three part sermon series on *Holy Trinity: What's In Our Name?***

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#### **Ezekiel 37:1-14**

God's hand came upon me and brought me out by the spirit and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. God led me all around them; there were very many lying in the valley, and they were very dry. <sup>3</sup>God said to me, "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, "O GOD, you know." <sup>4</sup>Then God said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear God's word." <sup>5</sup>Thus says GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. <sup>6</sup>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 your God." <sup>7</sup>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. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then God said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says GOD: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." <sup>10</sup>I prophesied as God commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. <sup>11</sup>Then God said . . . <sup>14</sup>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 have spoken and will act," says God.

#### **John 14:15 - 17, 25 - 27**

<sup>15</sup>"If you love me and keep my commandments, I will ask the One who sent me to give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. <sup>17</sup>This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor recognizes her. You can recognize the Spirit because the Spirit remains with you and will be within you.

<sup>25</sup> "I have said these things to you while I am still with you. <sup>26</sup>But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom God will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have told you. <sup>27</sup>Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid."

*Holy Trinity: What's in Our Name?* In the past few weeks we've reflected on two of the three members of the Trinity – Jesus and God. Today the Holy Spirit is our focus, the one who is known

as the “third person” of the Trinity. And to help us understand the Holy Spirit, I would like to tell you a story, a true story, about Father Lawrence Martin Jenco.\*

It was January 8, 1984. Father Jenco was program director for Catholic Relief Services in Lebanon. In Beirut, which was torn by civil war and inter religious violence, he oversaw the distribution of food, clothing and medicine for people caught in the crossfire. Bombings, assassinations and kidnappings were common and now he, himself, had been captured, a prisoner of the Islamic jihad – and would remain so for the next 564 days.

“You are dead,” said the young Muslim guard who seized him. Jenco was blindfolded and dragged outdoors. He could hear people talking and the pounding of nails hammered into wood. He imagined it was his coffin.

The guards wound packing tape around his legs, torso, shoulders, and neck. After stuffing a piece of cloth into his mouth, they taped his mouth shut, then wrapped the rest of his head, leaving only his nostrils exposed. He was transported under the bed of a truck and he was overcome with fear. And then he began repeating the ancient prayer, known as the Jesus prayer: “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Focusing on Jesus, remembering that his every breath was filled with the Holy Spirit, he developed a rhythm in his breathing; peace overruled his panic.

For the next year and a half, Martin Jenco was held in a succession of tiny rooms. He was used as a political pawn, became an inadvertent international celebrity, suffered countless indignities in the hands of his captors. During that time, other prisoners were taken. One night he heard whispers in the dark. “Who are?” “I am Ben Weir,” said a voice. “I’m a Presbyterian minister. Who are you?” “I am William Buckley,” said another. There were others. Terry Anderson, Associated Press bureau chief. David Jacobson, administrator of American University Hospital. Tom Sutherland, a dean of American University of Beirut.

These men were eventually chained in the same room with Father Jenco. They shared one filthy towel, one occasional tub of tepid water. They would bathe in it, consecutively. Eventually they all agreed that they were glad they were not married to any of the others!

Jenco remembers the April night that his guards pulled him from his makeshift cell up a stairway onto the roof of the building. They took off his dirty blindfold. The moon was full. It was awesome. Yet, in the light of that splendid moon, Jenco trembled with fear. “I was sure that they had brought me up to the roof to execute me” he recalls. And then, as he gazed on the brilliant luster of the moon, he suddenly became overwhelmed with the beauty of creation. It was infused with the Holy Spirit. And his fear turned into thanksgiving and gratitude.

\*This story is told by Ellrn Vaughn in her book *Radical Gratitude*, pp. 82 – 84, 142.

Then one of Father Jenco's guards spoke softly, in broken English: "We know you have not seen a moon in months. Not even the sky. But because the moon is so beautiful this evening, we wanted you to see it."

Truly, this was the only gentle moment in Jenco's horrendous days of captivity. Over the months, Father Jenco was treated violently. He was beaten and tortured, treated like an animal. He found himself meditating day and night on the words of Philippians 4, and he made these words his own. "God is near, Marty. Dismiss all anxiety from your mind. Present your needs to God in every form of prayer and in petitions full of gratitude." And he would pause and do just that. Afterwards, he would continue the reciting of scripture. "Then God's own peace, which is beyond all understanding, will stand guard over your heart and mind in Christ Jesus." And it did.

So in the end, Marty Jenco found that he was actually guarded by the Holy Spirit, not the young soldiers of Hezbollah.

His captors released him on July 26, 1985. He was greeted at the U.S. air base in Germany by family and friends. He met with President Reagan at the White House and with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican. There was a parade in his Indiana hometown. He worked hard for the release of his brother hostages and witnessed again and again to the importance of his faith during his captivity. Marty Jenco died in 1996. He fought the good fight. His run, done, and he is with his Savior.

The story of Father Marty Jenco's capture, captivity and survival have much to teach us about the Holy Spirit. For him, the Holy Spirit was a source of comfort as well as hope. It was active not passive. The Holy Spirit was the living presence of Jesus and the energy and grace of God and it infused his thoughts and prayers, his whole being.

Did you notice how, when first captured, Jenco became aware of his breath? As he recited the Jesus prayer over and over, he literally breathed in the Spirit. Without breath there is no life. Our Hebrew scripture lesson from Ezekiel reminds us of this truth. Ezekiel saw the dry bones knit back together; he saw the sinews and flesh come upon the bones; but it wasn't until the breath came into them that they were able to live. The Hebrew word for breath and spirit come from the same derivative.

When Katie Brooks went into labor on Monday, she was rushed to Beth Israel/Deaconness Hospital. Her unborn identical twins were only 30 weeks in gestation. Although they were measured by ultrasound to each weigh about 3 pounds, it was their capacity to breathe that was the concern. And so they stalled labor and gave her steroid injections to help the development of the lungs of the unborn babies. Breath. Without it we cannot live.

In Paul Young's, *The Shack*, a book that has been an interesting reference point for this sermon series on the Trinity, Jesus explains to Mack, who is experiencing a visitation of the trinity, that he is the best way that any human can relate to God or the Holy Spirit. "To see me is to see them" says Jesus. "And just who is the Holy Spirit?" Mack wants to know. "Her name is Sarayu," replies Jesus, "and she is creativity; she is action; she is the breathing of life; she is much more. She is *my* Spirit. Her name, Sarayu, is a simple name from one of our human languages. It means 'Wind,' 'a common wind,' actually. And she loves her name." (*The Shack*, p.112)

In our every breath, we are filled with the Holy Spirit. That is why Father Jenco could overrule his panic and fear on the occasion of his capture and instead be infused with peace. That's the essence of the breath prayer, a prayer that many of us at Holy Trinity use daily to connect with God. The breath prayer. It's as short as a breath. Remember it's formula? It's recipe?

On the intake breath, you breathe in what you most need from God, be it peace or love, hope or healing. And on the outtake breath, as you call on God's name, you give to God all of your worries, your concerns, your fears, your anxieties – whatever it is that interferes with your relationship with God, whatever it might be that separates you from God's love.

Today, this very day, what is it that you most need from God? Choose a word that summarizes your need. And then practice breathing that phrase as you take in a breath: and then, as you exhale, call on God's name as you give God your worries and fears, whatever keeps you from being one with God. "Give me peace, O God." "Heal me, Jesus." "Forgive me, Savior." "Encourage me, Spirit." Try it. Name your need as you breath in. Inhale. Expect that God will give you what you ask for. And then breath out your favorite name for God, ridding yourself of all that which is contrary to God's intentions for you. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Receive. Give.

Remember our gospel lesson. Father Jenco believed what Jesus told his disciples. "My Spirit will remain with you always and it will give you peace, not as the world gives, but as only I can give to you." That is the purpose of the breath prayer. In it we find the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit finds us.

What else did Father Jenco's story teach us about the Holy Spirit? That night when his captors allowed him to see the full moon is a reminder that the Spirit is found in all of nature, all of God's creation. The early Celtic Christians believed that the Creator's Spirit is in all of life, be it "the wind in the trees, the movement of the stars, the feeding of the birds in the fields, the building of anthills" (*Every Earthly Blessing*, Esther De Waal, p. 63). The Celts did not worship the thing in nature, be it the wind or the stars, the birds or the ants, but rather the Creator of those things. They believed that nature raises your attention through its beauty or interest above itself to the Creator. So it was for Father Jenco. That night in the moonlight refocused his thoughts as he contemplated the God given awesomeness of life itself.

Finally, Father Jenco teaches us the importance of recognizing that the Holy Spirit is always with us. Again, in the book, *The Shack*, the Holy Spirit, Sarayu, instructs Mack on her constancy.

“Have you been with me all the time?” asks Mack of Sarayu.

“Of course, I am always with you,” she replies.

“Then how come I don’t know it?”

“For you to know or not,” she explained, “has nothing at all to do with whether I am actually here or not. I am always with you...and you can always talk to me and I will always be with you, whether you sense my presence or not.”

So it was for Father Jenco. He was never alone. And in the end he recognized that he was actually guarded by the Holy Spirit, not the young soldiers of Hezbollah.

The Holy Spirit. One of the three persons of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit. The one who rescues us from picturing God in all too human form. God is Spirit and we worship God in Spirit and in Truth.

Yes, if we are to call ourselves Christians, then we also call ourselves Trinitarian. When we say God we say Jesus and Holy Spirit. When we say Jesus we say God and Holy Spirit. When we say Holy Spirit we say God and Jesus. As Krister Stendahl reminds us in his inspiring little book on the Holy Spirit, it’s all about putting the comma in the right place. God, comma, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. God, comma, the Creator and the Redeemer and the Sustainer. It’s not God the Creator plus Jesus the Redeemer and the Holy Spirit who sustains us. It is God in glorious and perfect unity with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, one with the other. (Stendahl, Preface in *Energy for Life*)

Aren’t we blessed to carry the name Holy Trinity United Methodist Church? May we never forget it’s significance and may we continue to grow in our understanding of the blessed Trinity.

In the name of the Trinity of Love, God in community, Holy and One, Amen and Amen.