

Title: The Holy Spirit
Text: Various
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Here we are with two more weeks to go. We are in the home stretch – week five of our six week journey exploring one of the oldest statements of Christian faith, the Apostles' Creed. The Creed has three distinct parts.

Part one begins with 'I believe in God the Father'. Part two, by far the largest part of the Creed, begins, 'I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son.'

And part three, which we begin looking at today, says this: 'I believe in the Holy Spirit.'

Right from the beginning the church believed and affirmed that there was and is one God, who is known in three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Let's begin with an obvious question; who or what is the Holy Spirit. Let me offer you this definition:

The Holy Spirit is a person we experience as a creatively powerful and comforting presence.

I just can't resist an obvious alliteration – person, power, presence.

First, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is a person. The Holy Spirit is not force, or energy like electricity. Like the Father and Son are persons, the Holy Spirit has a unique identity that we can come to know. Kallistos Ware, a Greek Orthodox bishop, says it this way:

The Holy Spirit is not an 'it' but a 'thou'. The Holy Spirit is not an object but a subject.
(Kallistos Ware)

The Holy Spirit is co-equal with the Father and the Son. There is no hierarchy in God.

The Holy Spirit is co-eternal with the Father and the Son – that is he existed before and outside time as we know and experience it. He existed before all created matter – in fact he breathed matter into existence.

Second, the Holy Spirit is a person we experience as a creatively powerful. The Bible tells us that before the earth was created, the Spirit of God hovered over the waters. The Hebrew word for Spirit is ruach, which means wind. It was the wind of the Spirit of God that breathed life into a formless void and shaped it into the Creation we experience and celebrate today. The word translated as Spirit in the New Testament is the Greek word pneuma, which means breath. The Holy Spirit is the creative and powerful wind or breath of God.

Finally, the Holy Spirit is a person we experience as a creatively powerful and comforting presence. Before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus gave a farewell speech to his disciples. They were upset, bewildered and confused. This was not how it was meant to end. Into this turmoil Jesus spoke these astonishing words:

I tell you the truth: It is good for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.
(John 16:7)

Jesus is promising the disciples and us the gift of the presence of the Holy Spirit. The word Counselor comes from the Greek word paracletos, which means a helper, an assistant, an advocate, an intercessor, a comforter, a sponsor, a supporter or a faithful companion. A paracletos was a person called to another's side when they needed assistance. The Holy Spirit is the one who comes along side.

Jesus is saying to the disciples and to us; do not worry, do not fear – I will not abandon you. While I will leave you physically, my powerful, creative and comforting presence will remain with you always, to the close of the age, through the person of the Holy Spirit.

Through the Holy Spirit we enjoy power-soaked and comfort-providing presence of Jesus in every moment of every day in and through all circumstances, good and bad.

The Holy Spirit is a person we experience as a creatively powerful and comforting presence.

After he was raised from the dead Jesus spoke with his stunned disciples. He said this:

“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” And with that he breathed on them and said,
“Receive the Holy Spirit.”
(John 20:21-22)

Jesus breathes the presence and power of the Holy Spirit – the ruach, the pneuma - into our lives.

Here is the amazing thing. Think about it.

Jesus breathed his last so that we might breathe again. Jesus gave up his spirit so that we might receive the Spirit.

What do we receive when the Holy Spirit is breathed into our lives?

The first thing I would say is this:

The Holy Spirit Breathes: Conviction into Rebellious Hearts

We are in the season of Lent – the period leading up to Easter. One tradition observed during Lent for many centuries is fasting – giving up something, for example eating meat. I read a true story this week of one mum and dad who were introducing some Lent fasting traditions to their three young daughters.

The family sat around the dinner table and the dad said to his girls:

"During Lent some people like to show they are thinking about what Jesus gave up for us by giving up something they think has become too important to them, like their computers or coffee or dessert or meat or television. It doesn't make God love us more; it just makes us more open to God."

The girls nodded. They were still with him.

"We would like to do the same as a family. We want to open ourselves up to God in a special way. Your mum and I are going to give up all desserts until Easter. We want you girls to think of what you could give up, something that means a lot to you."

The oldest daughter said straight away, "I will give up lollies."

"Me, too," our middle daughter chimed in.

The youngest daughter, the six year old, pondered the question a little longer, her mind working all the angles. The dad was feeling pretty proud. He figured she was letting his deep teaching sink in, that she was pondering what really meant a lot to her.

Finally she nodded with satisfaction and said loudly and proudly, "I want to give up *consequences!*"

We live in world where it seems everyone wants to give up consequences.

We want the freedom to choose our own course, but also the freedom from the consequences of those choices.

No one can tell me what to do – not even God.

It is never our fault, never our problem, never our issue.

Franz Kafka put it this way:

The state in which we find ourselves today is sinful, quite independent of guilt.
(Franz Kafka)

When God breathes his Spirit into us, our rebellious hearts are convicted regarding our sin.

Jesus said this to his disciples:

When (the Holy Spirit) comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and judgment and righteousness.
(John 16:8 – ESV)

The first and perhaps greatest gift of the Holy Spirit is that he convinces us of our need for God. We will not turn to God until we know and feel our need for God. And we will not know and feel our need for God unless we are convinced about our own sinfulness, sinfulness that we are powerless to change or shift in our own strength.

Mike Howerton tells a story about playing "mud football" when he was a kid. After a huge downpour, he and his friends found an open area covered in surface water.

They got their football out and had a blast. Let me read what happened next:

Every tackle would send you sliding for yards and yards. The ball was like a greased pig, which meant tons of fumbles and gang tackles and laughter

I remember tackling one of [my friends] and watching him skim across the surface of the water for something like four miles and thinking, "I might be in heaven." When he got up, I noticed something stuck on his shoulder. I peered closer, wondering, "What is that?" Now, there was a huge, concrete sewage runoff drain right next to the gully. And apparently during heavy rains, all sorts of things got backed up, and I don't know if the apartment complex immediately next to the school burst a pipe or what, but I do know we didn't really pay attention to the flotsam in the water until I noticed that something on Craig's shoulder. I peered closer and suddenly realized it was a soaking piece of toilet paper. In that same instant I realized the smell surrounding me was a bit more pungent than a typical mud football game ought to smell. I yelled out, "We're playing in POO WATER!" and we bolted for home as fast as we could.

Talk about an instant of mental transformation Sometimes in life we need our thinking transformed. Sometimes we think we're having fun until we realize we're rolling around in sewage.

Disgusting right? Imagine what it's like for God? He watches as we roll around in our own sin and weeps. Wilfully ignoring God, choosing our own path in life and damning the consequences – it is as if we are choosing to splash around in crap.

When the Holy Spirit comes we are convicted, convinced of our own sinfulness and need for God. When the Holy Spirit comes we see that all our acts of righteousness, all of our attempts to impress God and others with our good works and good intentions are as filthy rags.

Through church history, from New Testament times onwards, every revival, every major movement of God has begun with, or been marked by Holy Spirit conviction of sin that leads to repentance.

I can tell you all about God's love, the wonders of the Cross and what Jesus accomplished in it and the universe defining victory of the resurrection. I can tell you about all these things and more. You might even say 'Amen' from time to time. But unless the Holy Spirit has or will convict and convince you of your sinfulness and desperate need for God, every eloquent word I can muster and every sermon you listen to is worth stuff-all.

Paul says this to the church in Corinth, a church who thought they were far better than they actually were:

Godly grief produces repentance that leads to salvation without regret.
(2 Corinthians 7:10 – ESV)

What a cracker verse! My prayer is that Newlife will be a community filled with Holy Spirit fueled and Godly grief over our sin that produces repentance, leads to salvation and ultimately to a life without regret. I do not want us to wallow in our self-pitying misery, but to revel in God's transforming grace.

The Holy Spirit Breathes: Life into Dead Souls

Paul says in Romans that the wages of sin, that is the consequences of sin, is death. In his letter to the Ephesians he put it this way:

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.
(Ephesians 2:1 – NLT)

Let me put it plainly; apart from God and because of our sin we are spiritually dead – our souls are lifeless.

If all the Holy Spirit did was convict our rebellious hearts of our sinfulness then we would be worthy of pity indeed. But the Holy Spirit breathes not just conviction into our rebellious hearts, but also life into our spiritually dead souls.

Jesus says that we are born again; that we experience spiritual resurrection through the Holy Spirit.

In Corinthians Paul says this:

No one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit.
(1 Corinthians 12:3)

Faith is both a choice we make and a gift we receive. Only through the Holy Spirit can we declare that Jesus is Lord and be born again. But we choose whether we will cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives or whether we will ignore it.

If we choose to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives and trust our lives to Jesus as Lord then we receive nothing less than the gift of eternal and abundant life in this world and the new world to come. We enjoy and experience spiritual resurrection now – our dead souls come back to life - and we have the promise of bodily resurrection to come. Paul says in Romans:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.
(Romans 8:11)

The Holy Spirit is a life-giver:

In Genesis, God breathed his Spirit into Adam and brought humankind to life.

In Ezekiel's vision, God breathed his Spirit into dry bones and flesh and muscle and sinew brought back to life that which was once dead.

In the tomb, wrapped up in the clothes of death, God breathed his Spirit into Jesus' lifeless form and in that moment death was swallowed up in Spirit-fueled victory.

The same Holy Spirit that was the power that raised Jesus from the death can breathe resurrection life into your dead soul. Hallelujah!

The Holy Spirit breathes: Truth into Confused Minds

For much of the three years they spent with Jesus, the twelve disciples were confused and bewildered. Jesus' teaching was often too difficult for them to understand. But before he left them he said this:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.
(John 16:13)

The Holy Spirit breathes truth into confused minds.

It was the Holy Spirit that inspired the apostles to write the New Testament. Those who were once bewildered and confused were now inspired and insightful. Paul says this to Timothy:

All Scripture is God-breathed.
(2 Timothy 3:16)

God inspired, or breathed the truth of the Bible into existence through the inspiration of its human authors.

The same Holy Spirit inspires us as we read the Scriptures.

When we read the Scriptures in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit – words on a page become words of life and truth. Confusion lifts like a fog leaving only the glorious brightness of God's truth.

We believe that God is calling us as a church to move deeper into his word. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, as we read and reflect on God's word, we will find God's truth subverting our confusion.

I have introduced our dog to you before. His full name is Corker the one eyed wonder dog. Corker is 11 years old and spoiled rotten. Amongst other things, he gets to sleep inside. In fact, he sleeps in Joel's room. He sleeps in Joel's room because Joel is the only one who can sleep through Corker's snoring. When Joel is away Corker sleeps in our room. For me to sleep when Corker is in with us I have to wear these – no kidding. Corker would give the decibel levels of a Jumbo Jet a run for its money. But when I wear these I can't hear Corker, I can't hear Sue – I would struggle to hear a smoke detector going off. Bliss!

Most of us long to hear God speak to us. But many of us don't allow him to.

God is speaking, but we are not listening!

Let me blunt. Neglecting to read our bible regularly is the spiritual equivalent of putting in ear plugs – we are muffling the voice of God in our lives.

When we fail to read our bibles, we have the same attitude regarding God's voice as I have to Corker's snoring.

So, some of us need to take out the earplugs, pick up our Bible, open its pages and then pray the prayer of the boy Samuel, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.' When we do that, over time and by the Spirit of God, God's truth will replace our confusion.

The Holy Spirit breathes: Strength into Buckling Knees

Jesus is Immanuel – God with us – through the person, presence and power of the Holy Spirit – the comforter – the one who comes alongside. And when the Holy Spirit comes alongside, he breathes strength into our buckling knees.

Stephen was man the bible describes as full of God's grace and power. He was chosen as one of seven deacons to share the leadership load in the early church. Stephen was seized by some of the Jewish religious leaders and charged with blasphemy because he declared that Jesus was the Messiah. A very public trial eventuates. Asked to defend himself against the charges, Stephen courageously preached the truth of the gospel without compromise. This enraged the religious leaders. This is what happens next:

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus at the right hand of God.

(Acts 7:55)

Under unimaginable pressure, when the temptation to back down or back away would have been immense, in the power of the Holy Spirit God gives Stephen a revelation of God the Father and Son in their heavenly glory.

The Holy Spirit breathes strength into buckling knees.

How does Stephen's story end? He tells the religious leaders about his vision of God in glory and Jesus at his right hand and this enrages them even more, to the point that they take him out and stone him to death. While the stones are raining down on his body, Stephen prays for God to forgive those who are killing him.

Here's the thing.

When Stephen had a Holy Spirit breathed revelation of God in his glory and Jesus at his right hand he knew these two things: God was in control and he was safe. No matter what the religious leaders did to him, no matter whether he lived or died – God was with him, God would never leave him, God was in control, God would vindicate him, God alone would judge, God would deliver him from death and God would receive him into glory.

Was Stephen defeated? No!

Did his persecutors win? No!

Did death swallow him up in anonymity? No.

Stephen, in the midst of horrific circumstances, was more that a conqueror because Christ strengthened him with a Holy Spirit fueled revelation of God in all his glorious power.

We do not face trials like Stephen faces. But we do face trials.

Some of us are battling cancer or another serious illness and we struggle to trust God with our future.

Some of us have a non-Christian partner and we wonder if they will ever come to share our faith, let alone support us in ours.

Some of us are struggling with depression, or with marital difficulties, or financial problems.

Hear God's promise: The Holy Spirit can breathe strength into your buckling knees.

As he did for Stephen, the Holy Spirit can breathe into us a revelation of God the Father and the Son in all of their glorious power and strength. And when we receive that revelation, we know this:

The one who is in (us) is greater than the one who is in the world.
(1 John 4:4)

When we know this, then we will live as more than conquerors.

The Holy Spirit is the one who comes along side.

Have you experienced the Holy Spirit coming alongside you?

Has he breathed conviction into your rebellious heart?

Had he breathed life into your dead soul?

Has he breathed truth into your confused mind?

Has he breathed strength into your buckling knees?

Last Sunday morning I was up early – about 4.30. Before I had a shower I came downstairs and re-read my sermon notes while I listened to some worship music. I can't remember what I was reading or what I was listening to – but I do remember this; God surprised me. I love it when God surprises me.

All of a sudden the Holy Spirit breathed revelation into my heart and mind. In an instant, all at once, I was overwhelmed by the wonder of the cross, the power of the resurrection, the mystery of grace and the depths of God's love for me. I stopped reading, I pushed back my chair and I literally lifted my head and my hands to God and, tears in my eyes, silently cried out my praise and adoration to God. For the next five minutes or so I was lost in wonder, love and praise.

You know me. You know I am an emotional guy. I admit it. You could say I was just caught up in emotion or my tiredness. It was 5 in the morning after all. Humbly I would say, no. Rather, through the power of the Holy Spirit, for a few moments I waded into the deepwater of God's love and grace. I am so thankful that God is the one who comes alongside through the person, presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

Last week I asked you two questions; do you know who you are, and do you know where you are going?

I want to leave you with another; do you know God? I am not asking do you know about God. I am asking whether you know God. Have you experienced God as the one who comes alongside? Have you experienced the intimacy of his love?