

I Believe in the Holy Spirit

TEXT: John 20:19-23; Acts 2:1-21; Ezekiel 37:1-10

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 24, 2026

Although you would never know it, centuries before anyone in the church thought to make Christmas anything special or Advent a major liturgical season, the high feast days of the church year were Epiphany, and then the 50-day season that begins with the celebration of Jesus' resurrection on Easter and ends with today's celebration of Pentecost.

While most who have spent significant time in church circles can tell you that Pentecost celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit, and is sometimes called the Birthday of the Church, nobody checks in with family on plans for Pentecost dinner; and it's rare to find those who understand what exactly we're celebrating this day or why anyone ever considered it a festival on par with Easter.

So, we're going to dig in this morning to try to give both Pentecost and the Holy Spirit their due. The Apostles' Creed has us recite, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." What do we think we're affirming there? And, more to the point of this series on what we each believe as individuals, what do YOU think we're affirming by saying "I believe in the Holy Spirit"?

Some historical context. The festival of Pentecost was not created by Christians or by Jesus for his disciples. The word Pentecost in Greek literally means 50th. If you were celebrating your 50th wedding anniversary in ancient Greece, it would be called your Pentecost anniversary. The festival of Pentecost gets its name because it occurs 50 days after Passover.

It was established by Moses in Exodus 34, where it was called the Festival of Weeks—Shavuot in Hebrew—because it occurs seven weeks—more literally seven Sabbaths—after Passover. And remember that the number seven in the Bible signifies wholeness—something that is complete.

Pentecost is technically a celebration of the first fruits of the wheat harvest. Leviticus 23 makes plain that Pentecost is a bookend to Passover, and there's both a practical and a spiritual reason to put a span of seven Sabbaths between them. Although the laws about celebrating festivals were given to the Israelites in the wilderness, they were festivals to be celebrated only after they entered the Promised Land.

Passover is celebrated in the early spring and is also called the Festival of Ripeness because things are beginning to sprout. The instructions for celebrating Passover in Leviticus end with bringing the very first sprout from your wheat planting as an offering to God.

That sprout provides the metaphor for Passover—the remembrance of that terrifying night for the Hebrews enslaved in Egypt—when the firstborn of everything belonging to Egypt died and the enslaved Hebrews ran for their lives into the dark. It was the beginning, the sprout of a new people who were promised freedom in a new land.

Then, seven Sabbaths after the first sprouts were offered to God at Passover, they were to bring the harvested grain, turned into two loaves of bread, along with other offerings for the Festival of Weeks, Shavuot, which is also called the Festival of the Harvest.

So, the practical matter of 50 days—7 Sabbaths plus one day since they couldn't bake bread on the Sabbath—is to give the time necessary for those first shoots of grain to become wheat ready to harvest and be transformed into bread.

Spiritually, Shavuot became the metaphor of the fulfilled promise of God to bring the liberated Hebrews out of bondage, and then out of the wilderness to the Promised Land—the fertile land described as flowing with milk and honey—a land not just of promise, but of fulfillment—of completion; of wholeness.

But God had made that promise conditional on the people obeying the law of Moses—the covenant they agreed to at Mt. Sinai to keep the Ten Commandments. Remember that the sign of that covenant, as identified in Exodus 31, was the Sabbath commandment. The sign visible to everyone, both inside and outside Israel, that the Israelites had committed to keeping the entire law.

So, producing bread for Shavuot, becomes a metaphor for the people keeping their end of the bargain made at Mt. Sinai. They would offer the first sprout as commanded at the end of Passover, then keep the Sabbath, the sign of that covenant, for seven weeks, as the rest of the sprouts ripened. God, through the people's good stewardship of the land, provides the harvest.

Then, when that seventh Sabbath is over, on day 50, they turn the harvested grains of wheat into bread and bring two of them with other offerings to celebrate Pentecost. God and God's people working together with the land to feed the world, fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that through his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed.

While the Jewish festival of Pentecost is focused on celebrating the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, in a broader sense it's a celebration of faithfulness—the faithfulness of God in bringing people from bondage to freedom in a new land and the faithfulness of God's people to keep the covenant.

That broader sense of shared covenant and keeping promises is also suffused through the Christian festival of the same name. In Acts 1, we learn of Jesus' ascension into heaven. And just before being taken up into heaven Jesus tells his disciples not to leave Jerusalem and to wait for what God has promised them, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, coming in just a few days. Jesus' last words to them were:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

God has a promise; and once it's fulfilled, Jesus' followers will have a job.

But what, exactly, are they getting? “Holy Spirit,” or in the King James, “Holy Ghost,” rolls off our tongues like we know what we're talking about. What is it? And, what does it mean to believe in it? We're as confused about being baptized with water versus being baptized in the spirit as Nicodemus was in John 3 when Jesus said he had to be born of both water and the spirit.

The word for the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 and 2; in John 3, and our passage in John 20, is *pneuma*. That word translated into Hebrew is what Ezekiel calls to in order to animate the Valley of Dry Bones: *ruach*. Combined the words *pneuma* and/or *ruach* appear in the Bible over 600 times and have the same trio of meanings in English—wind, breath, and spirit.

Both also represent the essential power of life itself. *Pneuma* is what impregnates Mary in Matthew 1:18, and blasphemy against it is called the only unpardonable sin in Matthew 12. It's what strikes Ananais and Sapphira dead for lying in Acts 5, casts out demons in many places, and restores the sight of Paul after he is blinded by a vision of Jesus.

As for the Hebrew, *ruach*, we also find it right away in the Old Testament, in the second verse of Genesis. It—or rather “she,” as *ruach* is a feminine noun—is the midwife hovering, sweeping, brooding over the face of the formless deep, opening the birth canal for God's first word to become a world: “Let there be light.”

When God shapes the first human being from the red earth in Genesis 2, nothing happens until God does a bit of CPR and breathes the *ruach* into Adam's lifeless form. God's Spirit leads the Israelites through the wilderness, taking the form of a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

When God's Spirit descends on Mt. Sinai to give Moses the Ten Commandments, the mountain shakes with fire and smoke so badly that the people are afraid to go near it. “It's fine Moses, you go up there. We'll just wait over here until you get back.” *Ruach* is also translated sometimes as “tempest,” “anger,” and “courage.”

Later, but still in the wilderness, when the Spirit descends to speak with Moses in the newly created Tabernacle, the whole tent is enveloped in a cloud; and when Moses comes out, he has to put a veil over his face because the radiant light from his face was blinding people.

When Ezekiel has his vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, the text I read earlier, God puts all the bones back together, adds back the sinews and muscles, the veins, arteries and skin, so that the dead are all anatomically correct.

But, like Adam in Genesis 2, they still can't live until Ezekiel calls, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live!" She comes on the wind, and by the power of the *ruach*, the once dry bones rise to their feet and live, a vast multitude.

Stephen Hawking once asked, "What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?" I believe the answer to his question is the Holy Spirit. I believe the Holy Spirit in the Bible is, quite literally, the life force of the universe, the animating energy flowing out from God, who is the Source of all things, to make and unmake worlds. Every depiction of the *ruach* or *pneuma* in the Bible activates and animates. It doesn't *create* matter. It sets matter in motion. It is pure energy in both senses of that word.

It is the purifying fire, the wind that parts waters to reveal dry land, the force that brings inert matter to life, the passion so great that, when it enters a human soul, they can barely contain it without bursting apart.

They shine so brightly that it blinds other people; they cry out the word of the Lord in all the languages of the earth; they heal almost by accident; their bodies sometimes don't know what to do with themselves. And no tomb can hold them.

Jesus was born, I believe, to show what is possible when a human being is pure and spiritually strong enough to let the full power of the Holy Spirit flow through them and out to heal the world.

That, I believe, is the uniqueness of the human species—not our big brains, or our intellect. Not our ability to use tools or communicate complex thoughts. The ability to develop spiritually to a point where the fulness of God's Spirit can dwell within us and flow through us to continue creating, healing, and recreating the world without blowing us into a million pieces.

With the Holy Spirit within him, Jesus threw off the temptations of the devil in the wilderness to take a different road, to drink a less bitter cup, to take in the adoration of the crowds. He called out the hypocrisy of religious leaders, and turned the tables on their corruption with a whip he made himself.

He endured the abandonment of his closest friends, and suffered a tortuous and unjust execution, knowing that the attempts to destroy what he brought to the world simply could not prevail. He had within himself the *ruach*, the *pneuma*, the animating power of the maker of worlds.

When Jesus came into the upper room to prove that to his disciples on Easter night, Jesus passed to them both that work and that power. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." And then he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Seven weeks and one day later, in the account in Acts, the Holy Spirit blows across not just those few, but about 120 of Jesus' followers, as they gather to celebrate Pentecost, the fulfillment of the promise God made at Passover—to free God's people from bondage and lead them through the wilderness to a new and fertile land where they could plant and harvest and make a new world for themselves and for their children.

The law required that Jews from everywhere make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for both Passover and Pentecost. The burdens of traveling any distance meant that most people had been there in Jerusalem, for the duration. They had witnessed the slaughter of both regular lambs and the Lamb of God fifty days prior. All of them had kept seven Sabbaths, demonstrating their commitment to the commandments.

And Jesus' followers were doing their best to take on the job Jesus had passed to them on Easter night and again at his ascension—to witness to God's love in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

As they celebrate, the new world unfolds before them and they, who were once sprouts at Jesus' feet, have become the full grain, ready to become, as Jesus had been, bread for the world. The harvest was ready; but the workers were few.

Acts tells us their number was about 120. In response, the animating energy of the Spirit flowed into them like the rush of a violent wind. It was hard to hold. Observers thought they were drunk.

But the *ruach* swept over the crowds, the fire fell, and this time they were all invited onto the smoking mountain. By the end of the day, they had baptized 3,000 more. And those who had been dry bones in a desert wadi fifty days prior, stood to their feet, a vast multitude, now empowered to be channels of the energy out of which all Creation was born, the life force through which everything lives and moves and has its being.

The valley of this world is filled with the shadow of dry bones. The world again needs to be remade. The power to do so lives within us. The Spirit is there—the Spirit is here—hovering, sweeping, preparing the formless deep to bring forth the Light. We need only to assent to the terms of the new covenant Jesus offered on his last night on earth: Love one another. Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live! Amen.