

East Plains, Zoom, May 23, 2021

SPIRIT IN CREATION, SPIRIT IN US

Psalm 104; Acts 2: 1-13;

So, this is Pentecost Sunday, and some of us are wearing red, signifying the ‘fire’ of the Holy Spirit. Our ecumenical lectionary prescribes Acts 2, which we always read on Pentecost Sunday.

In case you’re wondering, the word ‘pentecost’ in Greek means ‘fiftieth’. It was a Jewish festival, 50 days after the first fruits of the harvest.

It was at the time of that Jewish festival, about seven weeks after the first Easter, that the disciples experienced this occasion of high excitement and empowerment, a moment of great inspiration, which initiated the life and mission of the Christian church.

All these centuries later, we remember this launching of the Christian movement into history. And what a world shaking history it has been!

But before we look closely at that text, some questions and some background.

Sometimes people ask me: What is this Holy Spirit? What are you referring to when you speak of the Spirit? I realize that for many people, even church people, the whole idea of the Holy Spirit is rather nebulous.

We can relate easily enough to the idea of God as Creator. We can see the creation all around us, and marvel at its beauty, its order, and mystery. And we can relate to Jesus, a human like us, his words, his deeds, his death and resurrection. But what, or who, is this Holy Spirit?

Sometimes people talk about the Spirit as if it’s something spooky that we cannot hear, see, or touch. We used to speak of the “Holy Ghost.” That was an old English way of speaking, which is no longer helpful.

But today some Christians, especially Pentecostals, or charismatics, seem to have experiences of the Holy Spirit that most of us do not have – speaking in tongues, for example, or other highly emotional religious experiences. So, I sympathize with the puzzlement many Christians who don’t have these experiences.

And yet, the Spirit is all over the Bible. We hear of the Spirit constantly in both testaments of the Bible, and the Spirit crops up regularly in our hymns and liturgies. So let’s get a handle on this, and consider some biblical texts about the Spirit.

We might take note, first, that this word Spirit, in the Hebrew Bible is *Ruah*, the same Hebrew word that means wind, or breath. The Spirit of God is the breath or wind of God.

It's the same in the Greek New Testament. There the Holy Spirit is the holy *Pneuma*, (do you hear the English words 'pneumatic' and 'pneumonia'? It has to do with air, lungs and breathing). The Holy Spirit is the holy breath of God.

It's a metaphor, depicting a Creator God who blows, or breathes out power, energy and light into the creation. It is God sharing God's own power and life, which is breathed out into creatures.

For example we hear in the first creation story in Genesis 1 that, when the Creator brought forth the creation in a great Bang or Burst of energy, God's Spirit, or God's breath was breathing into creation: The Spirit, or Wind of God, we're told, was "hovering over the waters," and God said, "Let there be light, and there was light."

It's poetry, of course, a human attempt to speak in non-literal terms of a profound, unspeakable mystery.

While 'Spirit' in the Bible, as I've said, means wind or breath, this term 'Spirit' also took on the connotation of personhood.

God as Spirit, is not a blind force, like a wind, but personal; not merely a Something, but a Someone, a personal entity, supra-personal, we would have to say, not less personal, but more personal than any of us. A Mind, an intelligence, far beyond our comprehension.

In John's gospel, in words ascribed to Jesus, we hear that God IS Spirit. God IS *pneuma*, wind or breath, a personal Being, invisible and untouchable, but like the wind, powerful, free, uncontained, uncontainable. We're told that the Spirit is free: She blows where she wills.

Notice how apt the metaphor is. God's Spirit is like breath in that it's invisible, but life-giving, essential for life; the Spirit, as God's breath, is both inside us, and outside us... God's Spirit is like that.

The Bible regularly uses this word Spirit to speak about God's presence in the world, and in us. The Spirit is God breathing out life, power and energy into the world, and into us.

Interesting that human beings are also said to be, or to have, spirits. We too are spirits. The human spirit is that inner personal, conscious selfhood, possessing freedom of will.

In Genesis 2, the poet tells us that at the beginning, God breathed her own Spirit into the first human being. Its telling us that we human beings, humans as such, have something of God's Spirit in us.

That means: The Spirit of God is not confined to Christians, or religious people, but is there in every human being – including me, including you. Including people we don't like. This gives dignity to every human person.

All the wonderful things about our humanity: our ability to think, to reflect, to pray, to build, construct and organize, to make music, art and poetry. All of this is from the breath of God living within us.

We notice that, in the Bible, everything God does is through the Spirit. The Spirit is said to empower Moses for his liberating mission, and also the military leaders of Israel; the Spirit inspires the prophets to speak messages of justice and peace.

So God, as Spirit, is not confined to 'up there', in a distant eternal realm, or heaven, but lives within people.

Not only that, other texts tell us that the Spirit lives not only in humans, but in all creation. Let's take note of the universal presence of the Spirit. We hear of this in Psalm 104, which we read this morning.

What a magnificent piece of literature this is! This is Hebrew poetry at its finest, written many centuries before Christ. How fortunate we are to hear this voice of faith from thousands of years ago! It expresses the Hebrew faith in a Creator who is present, not only in people, but is alive in the whole creation.

This text particularly emphasizes the natural world. And it's not just about God having created the natural world long long ago, at the very beginning. No, it's about the present. Notice the present tense that runs through this psalm.

The poet writes: "Eternal God, you clothe yourself with light like a garment; you spread the heavens like a tent... you make the clouds your chariot, and ride on the wings of the wind...." It's all present tense. Like in our creed, where we say "we believe in God who has created and is creating."

And notice that this psalm speaks mainly about the natural elements – the fire, the oceans and mountains, the animals and sea monsters. He sees the breath of God alive within all these marvellous things.

In verse 30, the psalmist declares: "When you send forth your Spirit they are created, and you renew the face of the ground." In other words, God's creative work is now and ongoing.

He's not talking so much of what we would call supernatural interventions. He's talking about the natural world in its ordinary life. He's describing not supernatural events, but natural processes, in and through which, the Creator Spirit is at work.

If we reflect upon the natural world, if we contemplate it in some depth, we sense there a dimension of transcendence. A presence of the divine within. We sense it. We can't prove it, or investigate it in a laboratory. Sometimes reflection allows us to sense something we might otherwise not notice.

From our modern point of view, consider the capacity of creatures to evolve, to adapt themselves to their environments. The world is not some predetermined mechanism, like a machine. No it's alive and dynamic, ever changing and adapting, with a certain autonomy of its own.

It's not a static world we live in, but a world in constant process – not a closed, mechanistic system, but a living, open system, where novelty can and does happen.

Consider the intelligence of animals – including the animals we know personally, the dogs and cats and horses – amazing creatures of instinct, who have nevertheless, considerable intelligence, even a personal character, and are capable of love.

Consider the instincts of wild animals – the wolves, the bears, the deer – their beauty and grace in movement, the way they lovingly rear their young. Consider the birds, their beauty, their singing, their instinctual migratory skill at reaching far off destinations.

The robin knows just where to go for the winter. The monarch butterflies, not as individuals, but as species, know where they are going, and where they are returning. It's truly awesome, and no mere accident.

Consider the intelligence and highly organized life of bees, and of ants.

Upon reflection we may sense a mysterious dimension to the whole organic world of plants and animals, of birds and insects, in which we may detect a divine presence, i.e., a presence and work of God's Spirit within them.

As we contemplate this, we may be moved to a certain respect, even reverence for the whole wondrous natural realm within which we live.

Reverence. I don't say worship. We don't worship the world of nature; it is not God; it is mortal, and subject to violence and struggle; we do not worship nature, or romanticize it, but we may revere it.

If we walk in the woods, sit quietly in a garden, allow ourselves to be awe struck by a great lake, or an ocean, or marvel at the birds and insects – we may indeed sense the presence of divine Spirit within it all. We may indeed be moved to praise the Creator, who is alive and at work through it all.

A sense of reverence for nature is badly needed today, as we forceful humans so often thoughtlessly dominate and manipulate nature without regard for its well being.

For the other creatures are also God's creatures, of great value in and for themselves.

When we forget this, we end up with environmental disasters like climate change, not to mention spiritual sickness. If we are cut off and disconnected from nature, we're cut off from the Creator as well, and may fall into a sense of emptiness and meaninglessness.

I have often wondered and certainly as a child, I asked the question: Why did God create these useless, even harmful things – like crocodiles, and mosquitos, and even viruses!

It seems that the evolutionary process throws up all kinds of creatures that are not useful to us, and even harmful to us. But perhaps that shows us that we human beings are not the be-all and end-all of God's creation. Consider the vastness of the universe, and its universal laws.

Not everything exists for us. All creatures, even the ones we don't like, are part of an infinitely complex and autonomous eco-system; they have their value in and for themselves, quite apart from whether they're good for humans!

OK, that's the universal Spirit, the Spirit in all creation, to which the Biblical authors bear witness.

But our other key text today, Acts 2, talks very differently about a very specific activity of God's Spirit with people.

It's the very same divine Spirit, not a different Spirit than the one we sense in nature, but one and the same Wind and Breath of God.

Some quick background here, concerning the particular works of the Spirit with people:

In the Hebrew scriptures, the Spirit is at work in the call of Moses, the liberation of the people from slavery, in the national struggles of the people of Israel, and in the call and messages of the prophets. That is, the Spirit is at work in the affairs of humanity. Gently leading, guiding, blessing.

And in the gospels we hear that the Spirit is especially upon Jesus. He is said to be "filled with the Spirit." In one text we're told that Jesus was raised up from the dead, by the power of the Spirit.

In the text we read from Acts 2, we hear of the event of Pentecost. Luke's gospel tells us that after the events of the resurrection, the disciples had to reflect and digest what they had experienced with Jesus. We're told that they were "continually in the temple, blessing God."

On this occasion the disciples, together with others, including Jesus' mother, Mary, are gathered in the upper room, devoting themselves to prayer. We are told that "suddenly the rush of a violent wind filled the entire house...." and "tongues of fire appeared among them and rested on each of them. And they spoke in other languages."

Apparently they burst out of the house, because foreigners from many nations gathered around and heard them speaking about God in their own languages.

Now, we modern folks may be a bit skeptical about such spectacular miraculous events. We may detect here elements of legend. But I suggest that the text is deeply symbolic in nature.

The great wind that blows through the house, is a way of speaking of the power of God's Spirit, which is understood as God's wind or breath blowing upon them.

The tongues of fire symbolize the presence of the Spirit, since fire is one of the symbols of God's presence and inspiration, and speaks of excitement, enthusiasm and of divine calling.

Like the burning bush of Moses, for example; and we often hear of God's cleansing, purging fire. Fire symbolizes divine presence. We're told here that the apostles were 'on fire' with the message of Jesus.

And what of the foreign tongues said to be spoken by the disciples? I suggest that the foreign tongues symbolize all the nations, of many languages, who will acknowledge Christ as Lord.

But also, the speaking of foreign tongues symbolizes the breaking down of barriers among different peoples, different races and ethnicities, different language groups. Because this is what the Holy Spirit does: She breaks down barriers of suspicion and misunderstanding among different kinds of people.

This is a Spirit of inclusivity, in which all kinds of people are brought together in peace.

Today we may say, Yes, different races, languages, classes, religions, genders, and even, yes, sexual orientations. The Spirit works among us for inclusive acceptance and peace.

This is what the Spirit strives to do among us. Whenever we see reconciliation, growing mutual understanding, the opening up of walls of division – this is the work of the Spirit among us.

So the text speaks of Pentecost as a real historic event, an actual initiation of the outreach of the first Christians into the world. So, while we may not take the details of the story literally, it is told in a legendary manner, which is rich in symbolic meaning.

Now, often in the New Testament we hear of people 'receiving the Spirit,' or being "baptized in the Spirit.' It's about becoming a Christian, and taking up the Christian life and the Christian mission.

While in one sense the Spirit dwells in every human being, there is also a sense in which we can be personally, consciously open to the Spirit.

We hear of Christians being 'in the Spirit,' and we hear of 'gifts of the Spirit' and the 'fruits of the Spirit'.

You might ask: How do you know if you've received the Spirit?

Well, it may not be a particularly spectacular emotional experience. For some people it is. Some people overflow with praise and ecstasy, speaking in unknown tongues. Some people weep with joy.

But not so with everyone. Some of us are born into the church, grow up in faith, and don't remember any great or dramatic conversion experience.

If you haven't had any such remarkable experience it doesn't mean that you're not a real Christian, or that you haven't received the Spirit.

If you have faith, even tiny faith, as small as a mustard seed, that is a gift of the Spirit.

If others see in you the 'fruits' of the Spirit, this too is a sign that you have received the Spirit.

If you have an unselfish passion for the environment, or for the hungry and poor, or for peace in the world, or if you're 'on fire' with solidarity for refugees or for marginalized people, that is the work of the Holy Spirit in you, moving you beyond your own self-interest.

In Galatians 5 we hear of these fruits of the Spirit: The apostle Paul lists nine of them: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." All of these qualities can grow in us, through the work of the Spirit in us.

The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, strives within us and among us, to manifest these fruits in the practicalities of our everyday life.

We are invited to be open to the Spirit, through prayer, through meditation or contemplation, through study of scripture.

We are admonished not to 'quench' the Spirit, because we have the potential to block out the Spirit from our lives. This is a danger. We may indeed quench or resist the Spirit, if the Spirit seems to challenge us or change our lives more than we like.

Now, to close this morning, I can do no better than to borrow eloquent words from our United Church 'Song of Faith':

"We sing of God the Spirit, who from the beginning has swept over the face of creation, animating all energy and all matter, and moving in the human heart.

"We sing of God the Spirit, faithful and untameable, who is creatively and redemptively active in the world.

"We sing of the Spirit, who speaks our prayers of deepest longing, and enfolds our concerns and confessions, transforming us and the world." Amen.

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