8-16-2020 Sermon “I Believe in The Holy Spirit”

James Howell describes the Holy Spirit as “the shy member of the Trinity,” saying that “the Spirit is everywhere and active, but not always right out in the open.”[[1]](#footnote-2) It certainly is the least considered member of the Trinity, earning only a single line in the Apostles’ Creed - *I believe in the Holy Spirit.* Where the Creed goes on to describe attributes of both God and of Jesus in the first two sections, the Spirit, on the other hand, is lumped in with other declarations of belief that conclude the Creed without any elaboration or explanation. Today, we will attempt to give the Spirit its due and devote our message to just that single line, that solitary expression of a Triune faith - *I believe in the Holy Spirit.*

The words translated as “Spirit” in scripture comes from the Hebrew “ruach,” and the Greek “pneuma,” both of which literally mean “breath” or “wind.” And we find examples of the Spirit described as either breath or wind through Scriptures, perhaps most famously in the Pentecost passage from the Book of Acts, where the Spirit is described as coming in a strong wind upon all those gathered, as well as like tongues of flame. In the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism the Spirit is alternatively described as descending upon Jesus like a dove. Breath, wind, fire, a dove - in music we hear the Trinity being described as *a dance,* a la, “The Lord of the Dance” - it’s no wonder the Holy Spirit gets short shrift sometimes, she must be having an identity crisis at this point!

In what would appear to be an attempt to perhaps bolster the flagging spirit of the Spirit, if you will, Justo Gonzales, in his book *The Apostles’ Creed for Today,* reminds us that “when we declare that we *believe* ***in***the Holy Spirit, this believing ***in***is in parallel to our belief **in** God the Father and in Jesus, [which as we described last week, means more than giving mental assent to the idea that God exists, but as trusting in and committing to.] This says something about both our faith and about the Spirit. Regarding our faith, it says that it rests and lives in the Spirit. Regarding the Spirit, the same affirmation declares that the Spirit is worthy is worthy of praise and adoration, just as much as the Father and the Son.”[[2]](#footnote-3)

Gonzales reminds us that the Spirit didn’t just magically appear at Pentecost, but that the Spirit was present “In the beginning,” where, in Genesis chapter one, we find the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. In chapter two, when God formed humans from the dirt and the clay, God breathed God’s Spirit into them, God breathed life into them. When Jesus spent 40 days in the Wilderness following his baptism, it was the Spirit who accompanied him. The Spirit has always been here; at Pentecost the ever-present Spirit was poured into the disciples in order to empower them to bear witness to Jesus Christ. In the same way, the fact that **you** are here, that to some degree or another you claim faith in Jesus Christ is because first, the Spirit was present in you.

The Apostle Paul states in 1 Corinthians 12:3, that “no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit. Gonzalez comments that “sometimes people imagine that the presence of the Holy Spirit is a higher degree of discipleship or of blessing than mere faith in Jesus. But the fact is that true faith in Jesus is always the work of the Spirit, and that therefore whenever we have such faith we may rejoice that we have the Spirit. Likewise,” he continues, “just as we ourselves cannot believe in God and in Christ without the Spirit, so the ancients - Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah - who did believe in God did so because of the Spirit. The Spirit had always been there.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

In our passage from John’s Gospel today, Jesus, in approaching his crucifixion, tells the disciples that he will send a Companion, a Helper - from the Greek word *paraklete,* meaning one who comes alongside - who will be with them forever. And he says, in verse 26, “The Companion, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and will remind you of everything I told you.” And we can imagine that the disciples were both confused and consoled by this message. The previous three years must have been a whirlwind for them - seeing all that they had seen through Jesus, trying to understand his teachings that Scripture tells us was sometimes way over their heads. This idea of a Companion who would help them understand and remember, even if they couldn’t quite grasp how it would work, had to be at least somewhat reassuring.

“The Spirit makes Jesus real to us,” Howell writes. “The Spirit’s vehicle is the Bible, which we think of as ‘inspired’ - meaning ‘breathed into.’ The Holy Spirit, the living breath of God, breathed into these stories, poems, and letters the life of God, so that the Bible might live with us, that we might grasp the universe from God’s perspective, so that we might read, and understand, what living with God and for God is all about.”[[4]](#footnote-5) And just as the Spirit inspired the writing of Scripture, so the Spirit inspires our reading and understanding today.

The words that I shared with you a moment ago that form the root of the meaning of Spirit, *ruach* and *pneuma,* “signify air that is moving…the breath you took just now is the Spirit lovingly giving you life.”[[5]](#footnote-6) In our second passage today, from Ezekiel’s story of the Valley of Dry Bones, the prophet tells us that this vision occurs as “The Lord’s power overcame me, and while I was in the Lord’s Spirit.” And then, after prophesying to the dry and brittle bones that filled the valley, representing the people of Israel, spiritually dry and dead in Exile, God’s breath fills the valley, fills these bones, adding sinew and muscle, then flesh, and then finally life.

The word “religion” comes from the the Greek *ligare,* meaning *to connect,* from which we get the word “ligament,” which is what connects our bones one to another. This valley of dry, bleached and barren, disconnected bones, through the life-giving breath or Spirit of God, gets religion, they are reconnected, religamented. Like the wind, which we cannot see but whose effects are known to us in the rustling of the leaves, “we see the work of the Spirit all the time, but not the Spirit itself, that shy member of the Trinity. It’s not a matter of what we see, buthowwe see what we see.”[[6]](#footnote-7)

Howell, though, in his book *The Life We Claim,* laments that some people give up on God, claiming as he puts it, “I just don’t feel what I think I’m supposed to feel.” Feelings, though, are not - or should not be - “the litmus test of whether the Spirit is a reality. Relationships and life are more than feelings. The Holy Spirit is with you and me always, whether we feel it or know it or not. Martin Luther worried that a [lack] of spiritual feeling can actually be the work of the devil, who hopes that we will give up on God once we find ourselves in a dry, barren desert of emotion.”[[7]](#footnote-8) Not unlike, I would suggest, a valley of dry bones.

The book First Samuel tells us in chapter 10, verse 6, that “The Spirit of the Lord will possess you, and you will be turned into a different person.” This is the grace of God at work in our lives. In theological talk we often hear of *justifying grace,* that grace from God that makes us right with God, or as some would phrase it, the grace that “saves us.” We also hear about *sanctifying grace,* that grace from God that once we have been made right with God works to transform us. We don’t as often hear about God’s *prevenient grace,* that grace from God that seeks us out in the first place, that searches for that spark, that seed of God that is planted within us, the grace that goes before us and enables us to have faith at all. As Howell reminds us, “The Holy Spirit may (and will!) be the catalyst for startling changes in your life [sanctifying grace at work]. Jesus came into world, not so we might *feel* different, but so we could *be* different. The Holy Spirit will nurture a whole new set of attitudes.”[[8]](#footnote-9)

“This thought is not entirely comfortable,” he cautions. “The Spirit “searches everything,” [we read in 1 Corinthians 2:10], and we may wish the Spirit were not quite so nosy.” I’m reminded of the song “I Will Possess Your Heart” from the rock band Death Cab for Cutie. ( I know, some of you are nodding in recognition right now and others are thinking “Death what for what!”) In that song, a young man is pursuing a relationship with a young woman and he tells her that if she will only spend more time with him, “he will possess her heart.” The Holy Spirit, through God’s grace, pursues our heart, and with it, our lives, and like in the song, if we will spend more time in that relationship God’s Spirit will possess our heart. But as Howell laments, “perhaps the gravest cause of our frustrations in being led by the Spirit involves time. We put in so little time with God, it’s little wonder we have such a poorly developed relationship. ‘God, I prayed for fifteen seconds three days ago. Why haven’t you fixed everything yet? I did have a minute and a half quickie devotional on Monday! What hasn’t my week gone better than it has?’[[9]](#footnote-10) Like any relationship we have, it will only be as good as what we invest in it. We will only get out of it what we put into it.

Howell reiterates what I’ve shared previously in this pulpit from other sources , “you aren’t saved just so you can get into heaven; you are saved to be transformed, changed into a different person, or rather, into the true person you were made to be. The Spirit makes you holy.”[[10]](#footnote-11) Any changes, then, that happen in our lives as a result of our intentional connection, our relationship with and through the Spirit is not by our grit or determination, but because the Spirit of God within us, changing and transforming us from the inside out. A changed life is the gift of God’s Spirit. In the midst of all that is going on in our world right now, people and communities are being forced to change how they do different things. Returning to school is going to be different, work life is different, shopping, visiting, everything is different right now. That is not to suggest that God brought this pandemic upon us to force change - that is not how God works - but God’s Spirit is present with us in the midst of all this, as our Companion and Sustainer, seeking to help us find better ways, seeking to help us connect in new and transformative ways, not just with God and our faith, but with one another.

Many churches, ours included, are analyzing carefully how they operate, how they do things, how they are structured, which ministries are vital and which are not so vital, in sum, what they are all about. This time of radical shake up in the world and with it, the church, allows us to shift our mental approach closer to what God is calling us to be, both as the church and as individuals. Churches, if they are being true to their calling, long to be led, not just by smart, careful, and caring people, but by the Holy Spirit, who will move us to dare great things for God.

The role of the Holy Spirit as our Sustainer, our Companion, our Helper, is so that we might have a stronger relationship with God. The Holy Spirit comes, as Howell writes, “so Jesus Christ can be lifted off the pages of history, no longer a relic in the museum of our religious past. This Jesus is God’s…gift to us, and the Spirit is the giver, the singing telegram, the package deliverer [or perhaps Door Dash food deliverer], who brings the gift to our door but seems to dash off before we see who left the wonder. And when Jesus is present, we are different, we become good (or at least better), we live boldly, we are healed, we join hands with others and dance [the dance of the Spirit.][[11]](#footnote-12)

So may the Spirit of God who formed and knitted you in the womb and who knows the number of hairs on your head continue to shape and transform you into the likeness of the God in whose image you were created. May God’s Spirit live in you and through you as you reflect God’s presence out into this world that so desperately needs to see and experience God’s loving Spirit in their lives. Amen.

1. Howell, 103 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Gonzalez, 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Howell, 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Howell, 110 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Howell, 110 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Howell, 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Howell, 105 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Howell, 111 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Howell, 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Howell, 110 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)