

VIGIL OF PENTECOST | MAY 27, 2023

ACTS 2:1-21 | JOHN 7:37-39

A couple of weeks ago, I put out an invitation for you to suggest some homily topics. Last week, we did one on vocation and civic engagement. And this week, we're going to turn to someone's question about the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. This person was asking about Jesus, but since it's Pentecost, I thought we'd focus on the Holy Spirit. When we read the Pentecost story from the book of Acts, when the Holy Spirit is poured out on the church, are we talking about something new and unexpected? Or are we talking about something that's been around for a while? The answer is both.

If you go into the Hebrew Bible and start reading Genesis, you will make it through two verses before you get a reference to the spirit of God. In the King James Version, it's stated plainly. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

The word "spirit" there comes from the Hebrew *ruach*. The Bible translation we typically use, the NRSV, translates that as "wind." Bob Alter's translation, which we used last summer, translates it as "breath." And if you think about this first creation story, it's a story where God speaks creation into being. *God said, "Let there be light."* What makes the voice and life itself possible? Breath. So already, just two verses into Genesis, we can see people using the imagery of the spirit to try to understand how God moves and acts in the world. The spirit is God's creative presence in the world.

And as you go through the Hebrew Bible, you see that same image used to talk about God's redemptive presence. One of the hymns Fred's leading today is about Ezekiel and the valley of dry bones. When the prophet stands in the midst of death, God commands him, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live." And some of you may even have Psalm 51 memorized because we sing it as an offertory sometimes. "Create in me a clean heart, O God.¹ And renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your holy spirit from me."²

What you have here is not a person of the Trinity, of course, or even a distinct character so much as a way of talking about how God is active and present in the world. That just as God breathed and spoke creation into being, God creates and sustains God's people through that same life-giving spirit.

And in the ministry of Jesus, you see a continuation and expansion of that image. In Luke's gospel, which is all about the Holy Spirit, Jesus begins his public ministry by reading from Isaiah 61. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he adds the kicker. "Today the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Jesus says that the energy behind his ministry, what gives him confidence and trust and assurance is not his own agenda or plans or

¹ In this context, the psalmist asks for forgiveness and a new way of life. Notice that the psalmist identifies the spirit as the agent of creation.

² There's a good summary in Bruce K. Waltke and James M. Houston, *The Psalms as Christian Worship: An Historical Commentary* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 477. This is just one of two times the phrase "Holy Spirit" is used in the Hebrew Bible.

resources. It's the spirit of God. It's his relationship with the God he calls Father. And as we heard last week, Jesus promises that same spirit to all of us. Jesus promises us his relationship with God the Father and says instead of living from your own agendas, anxieties, and resources, you can live out of that relationship.

That brings us to Pentecost. Because that spirit image shows up so much in the Hebrew Bible and the gospels, you might expect that the spirit would come and people would go, *Not a big deal. We knew this was coming. It's the thing Jesus talked about.* But that's not what happens at all. In fact, when you read the Pentecost story, what's so interesting about it is how remarkable everyone thinks this event is.

And it's remarkable for two reasons. One is that the gift of the Spirit is irrevocable. Once you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, once you've been given Jesus's relationship with God the Father, it never leaves you. It isn't something that you can lose if you make the wrong choice or something that has to be renewed every year. On Easter, when Jesus is raised from death by God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, we see that energy, that relationship, that source of life is even stronger than death.

You can see this in our baptismal liturgies. When we celebrated Valentina's baptism last week, she was anointed with oil. And when her sister put the oil on her forehead, I said, "Valentina, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever."

There's something liberating in that for us. Because we so often live in fear of loss. Of losing people. Of losing relationships. Of losing time. And so even when people promise us that we can rely on them, we're often left wondering if they're really being honest. But the gift of the Holy Spirit means that we don't have to take that same fear into our relationship with God.

A few weeks ago, I was chatting with someone who dropped in to pray in our sanctuary for a bit. And they mentioned that they hadn't prayed or received communion in decades, and they didn't know if it had been too long. And the good news is that it's never been too long. Even if you stopped listening for God, God never stopped loving you. You are sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.

The second thing that's so remarkable about the gift of the Spirit is who receives it. And who receives it? Pretty much everyone. "Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia... visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes" just to name a few. In our own context, we might think of it something like "Tibetans, South Africans, Venezuelans, and residents of Antarctica. Bosnians, Cubans, Greeks, and visitors from Staten Island." When Jesus's promised Spirit arrives, it isn't just given to this small group of people. It's poured out abundantly and expansively. Beyond what the apostles ever considered possible.

So the Holy Spirit may be enduring, but it's not static. It's always on the move. It's always pushing outward and bringing us along with it in service of God's people. And this brings us all the way back around to where we started. That just as the spirit of God moved over the waters in the beginning of creation, the Holy Spirit moves among us today and creates new relationships, new partnerships, and new understanding among all of God's people. Wherever there is chaos and division, the Holy Spirit brings reconciliation and peace.

The Spirit is always with us, always on the move, and always drawing us further into the love of God poured out in the risen Christ.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

ADVENT LUTHERAN CHURCH
777 WYCKOFF AVENUE | WYCKOFF, NJ 07481
(201) 891-1031 | ADVENTLUTHERANWYCKOFF.ORG