

John 20:19-22 (NRSV)

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Just Breathe

This study is the first in a five part series on the Holy Spirit titled *Just Breathe: Stories of the Spirit*. We'll be taking a look at five pivotal stories from the book of Acts. In each, it is God, in the *person* of his Spirit, who is the key player, driving events forward.

Acts 2:1-4 (NRSV)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Pentecost is a celebration of the Holy Spirit, who is God-present-with-us. It is the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit who empowers us, comforts us, and encourages us. It is the Spirit, the breath of God, who gives us life.

I was sorting through some papers on my desk recently and came across a depressing survey done by the Barna Group, the premier pollsters of all things Christian. Not long ago, they did a survey of self-professed Christians regarding "spiritual beings." Here is a quote from a summary of the findings:

Much like their perceptions of Satan, most Christians do not believe that the Holy Spirit is a living force, either. Overall, 38% strongly agreed and 20% agreed somewhat that the Holy Spirit is "a symbol of God's power or presence but is not a living entity." Just one-third of Christians disagreed that the Holy Spirit is not a living force (9% disagreed somewhat, 25% disagreed strongly) while 9% were not sure.

I can't say I'm surprised that a large majority of Christians understand the Holy Spirit to be a symbol not a living entity; i.e., a "what" not a "who." Still, it is disheartening and says much about the condition of theological and biblical education among adult Christians in America. That so many fail to comprehend their implicit denial of the Trinity (for I'm sure that most would automatically say "yes" if asked whether they believe in the Trinity) ought to make plain the case that, yes, doctrine matters.

So . . . here are the basics. There is one God of one substance, who exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three are *persons*. All three have always been and always shall be. The Spirit is fully and completely God, though not all of God, just as Jesus is fully and completely God, though not all of God, and the Father is fully and completely God, though not all of God. The Spirit is a "who," just as Jesus is a "who" and the Father is a "who." God is not divided into three parts nor are the three persons just three roles of God. How, you surely ask, can all this be? How can there be one God,

of one substance, of one nature, without division . . . and yet, there be three “distinct” persons. Well, that is the mystery we call the Trinity. But just because we can’t explain something doesn’t make it not so. Quantum mechanics has well-demonstrated that in the world of science.

The Spirit is God-present-with-us

Presence is delicious.¹ Telephones, e-mail, letters and all the other ways we have to communicate with one another are wonderful, but nothing is like actually being *with* someone. The ancient Israelites understood this. They knew that there was only one God, Yahweh, who had saved them from their oppressors and who had led them to a promised land. But God hadn’t just told them what to do or where to go; God had actually and truly dwelt with them. When they were desert nomads, God had given them instructions for building a moveable home for him, a tabernacle. When they had settled into the land they called Israel, God had given them instructions for building his permanent home with them, the temple. God’s people weren’t so foolish as to believe that God lived with them and nowhere else. They knew that God could not be confined to any one place, but they also knew that God was present with them in a very special and unique way.

This God-present-with-us in the Old Testament is sometimes called the *shekinah* (Hebrew for “presence”), sometimes Wisdom, and sometimes even the Holy Spirit (see, e.g., Isaiah 63:9-14). In the New Testament, this God-present-with-us is most often called the Holy Spirit, but also simply the Spirit or the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ or even the Spirit of truth.

The departure of God-present-with-us

To pick up the story, by the time of Ezekiel (about 600BC), God’s temple, the dwelling place of God, had stood for more than 400 years. But rather than living as God had taught them – loving God and loving neighbor – God’s people had wrapped themselves in superficial religious trappings (Jeremiah 7:1-4). Since the Jews had been unable to live as they should in the presence of God, God-present-with-us (aka God’s Spirit), departed the temple, “Then the glory of the Lord went out from the threshold of the house . . .” (Ezekiel 10:18). Though he would no longer dwell with them as he had, God did not forever abandon his people. God promised that one day he would put within them a new spirit, replacing their hearts of stone with hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:26).

The return of God-present-with-us

When Acts 2 opens, Jesus’ disciples have gathered in Jerusalem for the Festival of Pentecost. The city is packed, swollen with more than 150,000 people. Jews are there from all over the Roman Empire. In the weeks before the festival, the disciples had been with the resurrected Jesus, who before returning to the Father had told the disciples that they were to remain in Jerusalem to wait for the promised arrival of the Holy Spirit. Jesus had explained that God’s Spirit would arrive with power so that they could be Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and “to the ends of the earth” (see Acts 1).

One can only imagine the anticipation and, perhaps, anxiety that the disciples felt. Only weeks before, they had been cowering in an upstairs room waiting to be rounded up by the Roman soldiers after Jesus’ crucifixion. But Jesus had passed through death; his resurrection had changed everything. They didn’t know what to expect, but they

¹ I borrowed this wonderful phrase from Gordon Fee, whose work underlies much of this week’s study. Dr. Fee is a highly regarded New Testament scholar. He is also a Pentecostal and, thus, keenly aware of the reality and power of the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly then, Dr. Fee has devoted considerable efforts to helping the Christian community see that the Holy Spirit is more than just a small, still voice, but is the very presence of God in our lives.

wouldn't have to wait long to find out what was in store for them. As Luke tells it, they were gathered together when "from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind . . . Divided tongues, as of fire . . . rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages" (from today's passage). As Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit had returned with power.

Paul helps us to understand that the Holy Spirit is not some impersonal power at work in the universe, akin to the "force" in Star Wars. Rather, the Holy Spirit is the very presence of God, who has returned to dwell in and with his people -- first in Jesus (remember his baptism and the descent of the symbolic dove), then in the disciples at Pentecost, then in all Christians to this very day. Using the Old Testament temple imagery, Paul reminds the early Christian communities that they, collectively, are the temple of God, in whom God now dwells. "Do you² not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; see also 2 Corinthians 6:16-18). But Paul goes further, reminding individual Christians that each of them is a temple of the one true God, in whom God dwells and works. "Or do you³ not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:19-20)

The breath of God

Surely one of the reasons that Christians so often imagine the Holy Spirit to be a force akin to electricity, is that the Spirit lacks a proper name or even a personal designation, such as "Jesus" or "Father." In the old days, we used to refer to the Spirit as the "Holy Ghost." At least, that name captures something of the personal.

A second problem is that the biblical images of God-present-with-us, the Spirit, are impersonal – a dove, breath, wind, fire, even the "sound of sheer silence." Yet, how else could the writers try to capture the immediacy, power, and intimacy of God's presence? All words fall short of the reality of God; our God-talk necessarily is built on analogy and image.

Thus, we come to John's story of the Spirit and the disciples, hearing clearly Jesus' announcement that the time had come for the disciples to head out and comprehending the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the one Jesus had promised would arrive after he left (see John 15). As God breathed life into the man in the garden of Eden, Jesus now gives new life to these gathered disciples. This life-giving, life-sustaining breath of God is an image of the power of God's presence – the Spirit, God-present-with us.

The Holy Spirit is the renewed presence of God among his people – collectively and individually. This ought to take our breath away! We are Christians. We place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ. We have all been born from above (John 3). We have all received the Holy Spirit – as the Church and as individual believers. God is always with us. If it doesn't feel like it at times, it isn't because God has gone anywhere, it is because we have. God's presence, his Holy Spirit, is with us always. So . . . it shouldn't surprise us when Paul urges us to show the fruit of God's ever-present Spirit working in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). We are the people of the Spirit. We live by the Spirit and are to be guided by the Spirit. We have the "Spirit of Christ" (Romans 8:9), who enables us to cry, "Abba! Father!" (Galatians 4:6). Alleluia and Amen!

² The "you" here is plural in the Greek. A problem in reading English translations is that there is no way to tell a singular "you" from a plural "you." In some ways, it would be better if a plural "you" were translated as "y'all"!!

³ Here, the "you" is singular!

Judges & Apostles:

Biblical Women You Want to Know but Probably Don't

The new series in Scott's 11:00 class in Festival Hall

There are many fascinating and meaningful stories of women in the Bible. We are very familiar with some; e.g., Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and Delilah. But there are also many biblical women whose stories we ought to know. One woman was the leader of Israel more than a millennia before Jesus. Another was referred to as an "apostle" by Paul.

May 31: Deborah and Jael

June 7: Abigail

Daily Bible Readings

This week's readings take us through some of the most significant biblical passages about the Holy Spirit. In the coming weeks, we'll be reading through the book Acts.

Monday, Isaiah 63:7-14 God's presence, his Spirit, saves.

Tuesday, Luke 3:21-22; John 1:19-34 John the Baptizer and Jesus' baptism

Wednesday, John 15:26-16:15 At the last supper, Jesus' teaches his disciple about the Advocate, the helper, the Spirit.

Thursday, Acts 1 Jesus again promises the Spirit before he returns to the Father.

Friday, Galatians 5:13-6:10 The behavior of those who are called in freedom to live by the Spirit.

Saturday, 1 Corinthians 3:16-17 & 6:19-20 Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that collectively and individually they are God's temples.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. I grew up in the Episcopal Church. In our liturgy, we'd use the phrase "Holy Ghost," not "Holy Spirit." This phrase had the advantage of seeming more personal to me, but, of course, I'd usually end up imagining a person like Casper, the friendly ghost! Understanding Jesus as a person is easy for us. Understanding the Father as a person is usually pretty easy, even if we end up visualizing an old guy with a beard who looks a lot like Morgan Freeman, at least if we've seen *Bruce Almighty*. (Of course, we shouldn't try to visualize the Father, but I suspect that many of us can't help it from time to time.) But the Holy Spirit is a different matter. I find that many Christians have great difficulty thinking of the Holy Spirit as a person. Do you agree? Why might this be so? What are some concrete steps we can take to help us relate to God's Spirit as a person, not some impersonal force?
2. It can be very hard for us to grasp and to know that God's Spirit works in each of us. Sometimes we can allow ourselves to "tune out" God's Spirit so completely it is as if we are tone-deaf! You see, the Holy Spirit works with each of us, but not as if we are mere puppets. This is about cooperation and will and discipline. What can we do to help each other and ourselves to trust in God's Spirit and to embrace the power, passion, and purpose that is God's gift to us? Here's a hint. The immediate follow-up to Pentecost was this: "They (the believers) devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers." Jesus disciples did not sit around passively waiting for the next ecstatic experience. They went to work . . . but with a new passion and a renewed purpose.
3. How would you tell someone else about the Holy Spirit? How would you help them to see that the Spirit is not a "what" but a "who?" Why is this so hard for us to really understand? Have you experienced the Spirit in your own life? Here is another way to phrase it. Have you experienced God in your own life? Have there been times when you felt especially close to God, when a Scripture passage had an especially profound effect on you, or when you felt God tugging at you? Those are all experiences of the Spirit. When we speak of God with us, we are speaking of the Spirit. When you see God at work in your own life or in the world you are seeing the Holy Spirit/Spirit of God/Spirit of Christ at work. The Spirit is the very presence of God.