



“Spotting the Holy Spirit”
Scripture – John 3:1-8
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, August 27, 2017

Have you ever noticed how, in the Church, the first two members of the Trinity – the Father and the Son – grab all the headlines? God and Jesus are constantly on the front page, but to get news of the Holy Spirit, you must go to section B, page 11, column 3.

Flipping through the hymnal, we find that the great majority of hymns hoist God and Jesus for our attention, but we have to dig and dig to uncover the Holy Spirit.

Likewise, when we pray, our prayers are directed toward the first person of the Trinity with various adjectives attached – Gracious, Eternal, Mighty, Loving – and often conclude: “In Christ’s name, we pray.”

It is the same for sermons. We preachers are fond of parading God and Jesus all over the landscape, but the Holy Spirit? Well, uh, she must be around here somewhere!

In baptisms and benedictions, the Holy Spirit enjoys equal playing time. However, most days, it is Number 1 and Number 2 who are on the field, while Number 3 fails to make the cut.

In the 52 weeks of the liturgical year, there are four notable exceptions: Christmas, the baptism of Jesus, the Day of Pentecost, and Trinity Sunday. At Christmas, the Gospel of Luke generally dominates because it furnishes most of the details surrounding the birth of Jesus. In its first chapter, we read that the angel, Gabriel, went to Nazareth where he visited young Mary who was engaged to Joseph. The messenger tells Mary that she will give birth to a son and she is to name him Jesus.

Mary replies, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

Gabriel replies, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you.”

The Holy Spirit makes a second appearance at the Jordan River. When John baptizes Jesus, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove.

The third time our eyes are drawn to the Holy Spirit is on Pentecost. Fifty days after the resurrection of Jesus, the disciples are gathered in a house somewhere in Jerusalem, and the Holy Spirit blows the doors off. The Spirit rushes through the house, filling the disciples with courage and the ability to speak in foreign languages so that people from all nations can hear the good news.

The Sunday after Pentecost is Trinity Sunday – the day on the calendar that preachers find most humbling. That is the day we are supposed to stand before the congregation and convince you that $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. Following the service, alert children say to their parents, “ $1 + 1 + 1 = 3$. Why did the pastor say it equals 1?”

I know how most of you parents respond. “That’s why they are ministers, not math teachers!”

Once we make it through Trinity Sunday, which normally falls in June, we usually tuck the Holy Spirit back in bed and do not wake her up again until Christmas.

Why is the Holy Spirit not mentioned more often? It is not because it is seldom mentioned in the New Testament. I confess I was surprised to discover that it shows up nearly 100 times.

If it’s not lacking scriptural support, why is the Holy Spirit the overlooked stepchild of the Trinity?

It may be that talk of the Spirit sounds too much like fantasy. Some may relegate the Holy Spirit to the same category as poltergeist and wizards. The mere mention of the Spirit makes them feel as if they are being drawn into the make-believe world of Harry Potter.

Then again, the Holy Spirit may get short shrift in the church because many think it sounds too esoteric. They imagine that only devout monks who spend weeks in seclusion fasting for days and meditating long hours are able to fathom the mysteries of the Holy Spirit.

Or, it could simply be that the Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity that is most difficult to wrap our minds around. The first person of the Trinity is the Creator of the world and sometimes referred to as a shepherd or parent or king, all categories we immediately comprehend.

The second member of the Trinity – the Son – lends itself to forming a mental picture. Jesus was a flesh and blood human who walked the earth, left numerous teachings, and was the catalyst for the Christian Church.

But the Holy Spirit cannot be nailed down quite so easily. If we look at the word for Spirit in both the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, we find that both the Hebrew word *ruach* and the Greek word *pneuma* mean *wind* and *spirit*.

Please pull the pew Bible out of the rack and open it to the beginning of Genesis. Share with your neighbor and follow along with me as I read the first two verses. “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

Look at the phrase, “wind from God.” See the footnote? Go to the bottom of the page and read what the footnote says: *while the Spirit of God or while a mighty wind*.

In English, we have two different words: wind and spirit. In the Hebrew and the Greek, there is one word that can be translated either “wind” or “spirit.”

The Hebrew word *ruach* is especially rich, because Old Testament scholars believe it was originally understood to be an onomatopoeia which meant a mighty wind or gale.¹ *RUACH!!!* The word not only meant “wind” it sounded like wind. My sister lives in Houston and this weekend she is being pummeled by the *RUACH!!!* of Hurricane Harvey.

Now, turn to the Gospel of John in the New Testament section of the Bible. On page 81 find verse 8 of the third chapter. Follow along with me. “The wind blows where it chooses.” Notice the footnote on the word “wind.” At the bottom of the page, the footnote says “The same Greek word means both *wind* and *spirit*.”

Understanding the etymology of the word helps us comprehend the Holy Spirit. Like the wind, it is something invisible like a thought. Or an emotion. The Holy Spirit can inspire a new awareness in us; can spur us to embark on a new direction; can arouse courage within us; and can produce a sense of peace in our soul.

Like the wind, the Holy Spirit is also not sedentary. It is the divine presence actively moving in our lives, creating something new within us, transforming who we are, drawing us toward a more Christ-like existence.

Like the wind, the Holy Spirit is uncontrollable. As Jesus says in today’s text: “The *wind* (or *spirit*) blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.” The Holy Spirit is God active in the world.

German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann begins his book on the Holy Spirit with this sentence: “The simple question: when did you last feel the workings of the Holy Spirit? embarrasses us?” It embarrasses us, because we think we should be able to answer the question. But we’re not sure how well we can point to the activity of the Holy Spirit. I’m afraid that most people begin to reach for something extraordinary in the sense of being supernatural. A person says, “The last time I felt the working of the Holy Spirit was eight years ago when my uncle was in the hospital. The doctor said he probably would not pull through, but the family gathered around him and prayed, and he didn’t die.”

It may have been the movement of the Holy Spirit, but it might have been a missed diagnosis. No one can say for sure and that is the way it usually is with the activity of God.

I think I saw the Holy Spirit at work in a friend when he told me about the night he broke his addiction. He said, “All I can tell you is that my life was speeding toward hell faster than a high-speed train. I tried to jump off that train many times, but it kept pulling me back aboard. Finally, one night, after I had blown up another relationship, I dropped to my knees beside my bed, I buried my head in the mattress and wailed. I prayed over and over for God to stop the train and let me step off. And that’s when it happened. I leapt off that speeding train and landed on solid ground. A feeling washed over me that it would be all right – that *I* would be all right – and I’ve been clean ever since.”

Evidence of the Holy Spirit? I think so. I think we see the traces of the Holy Spirit when someone feels pressure to evade the truth, but instead feels a strong nudge that gives him the courage to speak the honest words begging to be uttered.

Could it be the footprint of the Holy Spirit when someone with an already crowded schedule volunteers to spend an hour each week with a child who needs help with schoolwork and an encouraging word?

Maybe it is a sign of the Holy Spirit when a woman in the midst of a divorce gets a call from a girlfriend to come over for dinner and she is able to pour out her anxieties about her uncertain future, and before the evening ends, the dread has lifted and a new awareness washes over her: she will survive this.

I am confident that it is the Holy Spirit when someone whose hour glass is running out switches roles with her loved ones and begins to calm everyone else, reassuring them that after she is gone, all will be well.

The nudges of the Holy Spirit are evident when someone who was blind to the prejudice he harbored in his soul becomes aware of it and works to erase it.

It must have been the Holy Spirit nibbling away at the psyche of a friend when the light bulb of forgiveness came on and she realized she did not have to keep beating herself up for a past mistake.

The Holy Spirit frequently attempts to grab our attention and to shake us from stale routines and toxic patterns. The Holy Spirit stirs within us to break open our hearts, to hone our vision, and to redirect our path.

Is the *RUACH* of God blowing through you so that you will *see* the world differently and *be* in the world differently?

May you awaken to the stirrings of the Holy Spirit within you.

NOTE: 1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 40.

Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

For your abiding presence, O God, we give thanks. You gather us from near and far, and surround us with your Spirit. You journey with us, behind, before, beside. No matter where we wander, you go with us – our companion and our guide. So we come to you with grateful hearts, knowing you hear our prayers.

We give thanks that you draw us close and claim us as your own. Ever-present God, help us to sense your Spirit moving among us ... not only in this time we have set apart as sacred, but in every ordinary moment of life. Open our eyes to glimpse your guiding hand in our lives, and open our hearts to respond to your Spirit's call. Sustain all of us, we pray, in the life of faith and help us to be faithful disciples.

God – we especially need your sustaining Spirit when we are weary and when our hearts are heavy ... When our world seems too broken; our communities too torn; our bodies too fragile ... When darkness enshrouds us and we can barely glimpse the light. Fill us with your comfort and your peace, we pray.

We lift before you the concerns of our hearts, and long for your healing Spirit to descend upon every corner of our hurting world.

We pray for those dear to us who seek your healing in body, mind, or spirit. Strengthen those who are battling disease, and draw those who mourn into your loving embrace. Give hope to those in the depths of despair, and surround those overcome by worry with your peace.

We pray for all in the path of Hurricane Harvey ... For those who have packed up their lives and fled the storm, for those left to survey the damage, for those who fear the destruction still to come.

We *continue* to pray for communities near and far that are conflict-ridden, that are reeling from violence, that have been thrown into turmoil and are struggling to rebuild. We still hold in our hearts the people of Sierra Leone and of Spain, who mourn in the wake of tragedy and terror. And we pray, O God, for our nation, as we grapple with deep-seeded division and seek a path forward that leads to justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Ever-Creating God – whose Spirit once hovered over watery chaos to awaken Creation – sweep over our hurting world, and summon us all to new life.

We lift this prayer in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ – the one who gave us words to pray: **“Our Father ...”**