

## **Who is the Holy Spirit? - Genesis 1:1-2, 26-27, 2:7, Acts 19:1-2, 6-7 – Aug. 2, 2009**

A children's catechism class was learning the Apostles Creed. Each child had been assigned a sentence to repeat. The first one said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." The second child said, "I believe in Jesus Christ, His only Son." When he had completed his sentence, there was an embarrassing silence. Finally, one child piped up, "Teacher, the boy who believes in the Holy Spirit isn't here."

With a show of hands, is there at least one person here this morning who believes in the Holy Spirit? Of course there is. With another show of hands, how many of you feel like you could easily explain just who or what the Holy Spirit is? Not so many. Who is the Holy Spirit?

I think for many of us we would admit that God the Father makes sense to us. God the Son we can understand and identify with to some degree. But when we start talking about the Holy Spirit, things begin to get fuzzy. When it comes to the Holy Spirit, we often experience confusion, uncertainty, and even fear, hence the reason someone requested this topic for our People's Choice sermon series this summer. In fact, the concept of the Holy Spirit is so confusing – and so important I might add – that I am going to focus on it today and next Sunday as well. This week we will attempt to figure out just who the Holy Spirit is and next week what the Holy Spirit does.

Unfortunately, I think too many of us tend to think of the Holy Spirit as that warm, tingly feeling we get at certain times when we are with other Christians. For many Christians, the Holy Spirit is an "it," a vague blob of church talk, or "a giant fogbank," as one person put it. For others, it is just downright spooky. In fact, the King James

translation of the Bible calls it the Holy Ghost. But in actuality the Holy Spirit is God's active, dynamic presence with us. Let me say that again: the Holy Spirit is God's active, dynamic presence with us. Lets up pack this a bit this morning and see if we can make more sense of just who the Holy Spirit is.

In the bible there is an unfolding drama whereby God reveals himself to people. Somebody once described the work of God's redemptive plan in human history as a symphony in three movements. From the day of creation to the coming of John the Baptist is the first movement of the symphony. Granted, that one might be a bit too long for most of us but I think you get what they mean. The birth and life of Jesus, his tragic death and triumphant resurrection makes up the second movement. And the third takes place from the day of Pentecost until the end of human history - obviously making us an important part of this wonderful symphony. Throughout this entire symphony, The Holy Spirit – as well as the person of Christ – becomes more defined and understandable as the revelation of God progresses.

The Old Testament is full of references about the Holy Spirit – about ninety all together – including the very beginning of the bible with the story of the creation of the heavens and the earth. Without getting into a debate on the hot topic of evolution verses creation – at least not this week- the scriptures tell us that it was the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of God – that was brooding and hovering over primordial chaos. And when God spoke, the Holy Spirit became the agency of creation.

Further along in the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit comes upon particular men and women at particular times in order to empower them to accomplish particular tasks. Take for example the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Exodus when the Spirit comes upon a man named

Bezalel, who is an artist – a craftsman. The Holy Spirit empowers this man and his team of workers to skillfully create the mobile sanctuary of worship known as the tabernacle for the Jewish people. This eventually becomes their place of worship during their migration from the land of Egypt to the land of promise thanks to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Other stories in the Old Testament tell how the Holy Spirit comes upon men and women in order to give them wisdom and power to guide the people of Israel. The book of Judges is full of such stories. The Holy Spirit comes upon Gideon and gives him a combination of political and religious empowerment as he leads God's people. The same happens for the Kings of Israel. A great example is found in Psalm 51 – one of my favorites – when David cries out in a spirit of confession: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

And who can deny the presence of the Holy Spirit among the prophets of the Old Testament from Isaiah to Jeremiah to Joel. Once again we find people who were called and inspired by the Holy Spirit to deliver his message to the house of Israel as God's redemptive plan is revealed. Joel – speaking for God in the first person – assures them that in the last days, God will pour out his Spirit upon all humankind. Male and female, young and old – all will be the recipients of the Holy Spirit. And most likely Joel's hearers must have scratched their heads and said – what is he talking about?

Then we move into the New Testament with the birth of John the Baptist and the coming of Jesus Christ who is clearly the unique man of the Spirit. By the time of the

early church, it is pretty clear to them that God has visited this planet in the form of his Son Jesus Christ and that the Holy Spirit has come upon the earth and the people. But in the church councils throughout the second, third and fourth centuries, they grapple with how this all fits together – God, Son and Holy Spirit. Often due to questions and controversies that were forcing themselves against the Christian faith, the leaders got together to try and determine what was really true.

Take out if you will a hymnal from the seat in front of you and turn to page 880 where you will find two creeds of the Christian Church. The one on the right – the Apostles Creed – which I referenced in my opening story – is probably more familiar to some of you while the one on the left is the Nicene Creed. You will notice that both creeds are divided into three stanzas – each of the stanzas representing a part of the revelation of God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit or what we know in the Christian tradition as the Trinity.

Now the word Trinity is not found in the bible – which has created some angst for many believers - but the word is the best expression we have for how God has revealed himself progressively in scripture. And unfortunately the creeds are not really that much help when they come to the Holy Spirit either.

The Apostles Creed basically says we believe in the Holy Spirit - much like we all agreed early on this morning – but is not much help in understanding who the Spirit is. The Nicene Creed gives us a little bit more but not much. It at least confirms what I have already spoken of as the Spirit as the Giver of Life who inspired and spoke through the prophets. But that is about it. Or is it? What is most significant about this short description of the Holy Spirit is the belief that the Holy Spirit is God. Listen to what it

says: the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son; is with the Father and the Son and is to be worshiped and glorified like the Father and the Son.

In other words, the Holy Spirit is not just some life force. Instead, the Holy Spirit is a "person"—not a human being, but a being that has a mind and a will, who communicates, who acts, and most of all, who loves. The Holy Spirit is the guiding, directing, comforting, healing and loving presence of God with us even now. Jesus even told his disciples in John 16 that it was better for them that he went away, because then he could send the Spirit for the Spirit did not have the same physical time-and-space limitations that Jesus had in his life on earth. While Jesus could only be with them in a certain time and certain place the Holy Spirit could be with them and in them for all eternity.

Mark Brunner, a Lutheran Lay Minister from Wisconsin tells a story about his family life that I hope sums up what is so seemingly difficult to explain when answering the question – who is the Holy Spirit. He writes: Growing up, one thing that I always was pretty sure of was that a day would seldom go by when I did not live in the presence of my parents. My mother was there for us in the morning when we awoke and we saw her gentle face again at night when we went to bed. Since, with the exception of a brief time when my dad was out of work, she did not work outside of the home, we could always count on her presence somewhere nearby. My dad's employment did not take him far from home nor did it involve travel that would take him out-of-town. Waiting for him to come home was a daily vigil and supper, that most glorious repast of the day for a little boy, was dependent on his presence.

Vacations were also a family affair; so even these times of recreation found us gathered together. My parents seldom if ever took vacations apart from us children. However, there was one occasion where that could not be avoided. My father had won a trip through his job as an insurance salesman and that trip was designed for two, not eight. For us children this was a traumatic time in some respects.

First, mom would not be there in the morning to wake us up and she certainly wouldn't be there to cook dinner. There was little point in keeping vigil at the door waiting for the man whose very name spelled "supper". That wouldn't be happening either. Like little puppy dogs we watched as they packed their suitcases and checked their tickets. They assured us that even though they would be hundreds of miles away, we should not be afraid. Grammie was coming to stay with us.

Grammie, my maternal grandmother, was a short little woman with thick glasses who liked to give us quarters when we visited her. I can still remember the feeling when she walked through the front door to greet us children. Our parents may be leaving, but Grammie was coming. That was a great comfort to us. Even though we longed to be with them, just having Grammie there made it easier. In a sense, whenever we looked at her as she busied herself around the kitchen; we saw a picture of mom.

No matter how alone we might feel in life, we are truly never alone. As I saw a reflection of my mom working in the kitchen even though she was far away, so each of us sees a reflection in the person of the Holy Spirit of the One who loves us even more than our mother, Jesus Christ. We may be separated as Heaven is from Earth, but as long as the Comforter is opening the door of our heart, making himself busy in the kitchen of our lives, we need never feel lonely for our Savior. With the Comforter – the

Holy Spirit - in our lives, it's like dad coming home and mom in the kitchen. And then he concludes his story with: Supper is served!

The question I would like to leave you with this morning – especially right before supper is served - is this: are you hungry? Are you hungry for more of God's presence – for a deepening experience of his power in your life? The Holy Spirit only comes when he is invited and conversely stays out when he is not welcomed. When all is said and done – it is not really as complicated as we might think. We just have a tendency to make it that way. The bottom line is God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask. My sincere hope and prayer for you this morning as individuals and together as the family of faith – the body of Christ – is that we will all invite the Holy Spirit to come into our lives and our church in new and fresh and powerful and meaningful ways today and always. Amen.