

“Holy Spirit: Breath, Voice, and Power”

September 223, 2018

Back to Basics series

When was the last time you paid attention to your own breathing? It’s an incredible thing if you stop and think about it - our bodies are fearfully and wonderfully made. We inhale and exhale without thinking about it most of the time. But ask someone who has experienced any kind of breathing problem, and they’ll tell you how precious good, deep breaths truly are. Most of the time, breath is quiet and unassuming. And yet it’s the most important thing we do.

As we’ve been looking at the foundations of our faith, we started with “God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth” and then “Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.” Today we come to the most mysterious part of the Trinity: “I believe in the Holy Spirit...”

Now the word for “spirit” is similar to the word for “wind” and “breath” in both Hebrew and Greek. So the image of the Holy Spirit as both “breath” and “wind” is a powerful one. Think of the power of breath and wind! We know what wind can do to create energy and even to destroy. So these images carry a sense of power as we encounter the Holy Spirit.

And consider that it is the third person of the Trinity. A few of you have shared your understanding of how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work together in relationship to each other, and that’s the key – relationship. For example, I’m one person, but I’m a daughter, spouse, and mother. It’s still me, but the relationship I have with specific people is different. And that’s a helpful image to hold as we think about the Trinity.

I also wanted to share a few visual aids: **SHOW SLIDES**

Many times we visualize the Trinity as a triangle. You can see here the different symbols for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - each distinct, but equal. There’s the Trinity represented by a knot that can’t be broken. And there’s the image of the dance of the Trinity - again, joined together.

The Spirit is present at creation (we hear it in Genesis) - that it was over everything before God created. God breathes the “breath of life” into humanity. The Spirit inspires the psalmists and the prophets, and God promises “a new heart and a new spirit” to God’s people in Ezekiel’s time.

At Jesus’ baptism, we’re told that the Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove and a voice claimed him as a beloved Son. Today as a church family, we celebrate God’s grace in young Magdalene’s life.

Baptism is a holy moment, and a holy reminder that we are born of water and the Spirit. I have the privilege of officiating, pouring the water, and touching Magdalene's head, but the Holy Spirit is doing the work and is present with her and with us here. The Holy Spirit is confirming God's love and grace for this young child and reminding us of God's love and grace for us, too. Our prayer and hope is that Magdalene will claim God's grace for herself and confirm her faith. That's why we call it confirmation!

When Jesus begins his public ministry, he quotes the prophet Isaiah saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..." and proceeds to share his mission - what he came to do - to preach, to bring freedom, to proclaim that it's God's time!

Jesus promises the Holy Spirit to the disciples as he offers his final speech before crucifixion. He has been with them, but the Spirit will be a part of them. The Spirit will be a helper and a teacher - also called an Advocate and Counselor - who works in them - reminding them of all that Jesus has taught them in their time together.

And after resurrection, Jesus tells them to wait for the Holy Spirit to come, and it does. Who can forget the chaos of Pentecost? Wind and tongues of fire, people thinking that folks were totally drunk by mid-morning because of this Holy Spirit breakout in Jerusalem!

Peter proceeds to preach about how Jews and Gentiles are both a part of God's family, and the Spirit leads him and others into every corner of the world to share Good News. It's a reminder of the Spirit helping us to know the truth - then and now.

It would seem that the story ends there. The Holy Spirit came. Good News spread all over the place. Lives were changed. The church grew. But here's the kicker: the story isn't over! The Holy Spirit is at work in our midst as the very presence of God in the world today! Pastor Jim Cymbala quotes an early Methodist preacher when he says that "Christianity is hopeless without the Holy Spirit."

Cymbala says that the Holy Spirit is underappreciated. In our United Methodist tradition, we don't use a lot of Holy Spirit language. Perhaps we talk about God and Jesus, but for some, speaking about the Holy Spirit isn't as comfortable. We sing about the Spirit, and that serves us well, but we don't speak about it much.

I've heard people say, "I'm not sure what to say about the Holy Spirit. It's so unpredictable." And that's true, which is a part of the struggle. But other traditions place a strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit. If you know anyone connected to a Pentecostal church, perhaps you've heard them talk about it.

I'm grateful for seminary friends and clergy colleagues from a Pentecostal tradition who shared their experience and understanding of the Holy Spirit with me. I

was able to ask questions, and I didn't need to be scared or worried even when we had slight differences in theology.

I could claim my own experiences of the Spirit, and I was able to speak more boldly about them. Sometimes I think we've just made it harder than it needs to be. The Holy Spirit is God's present activity in our midst. In our United Methodist teaching, we say that the Holy Spirit is working when we sense God's leading, God's challenge, God's support, and God's comfort.

Maybe that's helpful to remember because then maybe we can claim it a little more boldly. We share "God moments" that proclaim God's leading, challenge, support, and comfort. That's the Holy Spirit! The Holy Spirit has been present to lead and guide me - sometimes with the right word from a trusted person at the right time, and other times with a powerful sense of God's voice and conviction. Have you felt those nudges to think about or pray for someone? To send a card and make a call?

Notice that the creed doesn't say much more about the Holy Spirit - no physical characteristics or anything more descriptive. But then it continues with affirmations about the church universal (that's what "catholic" with a lowercase "c" means), the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and eternal life. So there's something about the Spirit's work that brings people together as the church and helps us to remember the faith of the saints whose presence surrounds us when we gather. The Holy Spirit helps us to remember what Jesus said about God's grace and forgiveness for ourselves and the need to forgive others. The Spirit gives us hope beyond death and offers us faith in the promise of eternal life.

One way we describe the Trinity is God as Creator, Jesus Christ as Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit as Sustainer. The Spirit helps us grow in faith and trust, and the Spirit helps us to know that God is close to us. There have been many times when I have no other explanation for something helpful that I said or someone said to me, or something that happened except that the Holy Spirit was involved.

I like Paul's words to early Christians in Rome, and I can imagine how much they needed to hear that they weren't alone as they walked with God.

HOW SLIDE: Romans 8: 26-27 (TEV)

²⁶In the same way the Spirit also comes to help us, weak as we are. For we do not know how we ought to pray; the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express.

²⁷And God, who sees into our hearts, knows what the thought of the Spirit is; because the Spirit pleads with God on behalf of his people and in accordance with his will.

So, what about the Holy Spirit? What do you say about it? How do you experience it? Yes, it's unpredictable. Yes, it's active – all of the images we have in Scripture like breath, wind, and fire are active. Sometimes the Spirit affirms, and sometimes the Spirit pushes us to change. Sometimes we feel the Spirit present when we're alone in prayer, and sometimes when we worship together - or even at a meeting!

The Spirit gives us gifts to be used for ministry, and each of us has them - whether it's administration, wisdom, teaching, serving, or others. None of us has all of them, but they all exist in the Body of Christ.

And there's the fruit of the Spirit - evidence of the Spirit in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Gifts and fruits are not something we create, but the Spirit works in us to bring them out and help us to use them for God's Kingdom.

Friends, one thing is certain: the Holy Spirit is in the business of transformation - and that usually means change! Change is difficult sometimes; we don't all love it. But we're changed from the inside out.

A colleague shared this image of the Spirit that I found helpful: "The Holy Spirit is like that supervisor who invites us to do a big, difficult job, and then equips us, and supports us, and empowers us to accomplish that job. The Holy Spirit sends us into the world to do God's work as well, but we are not sent out on our own without the resources to accomplish our task." The Holy Spirit isn't simply the presence of God with us, but also the power of God in us.

So, what do you believe? How have you experienced the Holy Spirit? Was it a moment when you felt undeniably that God spoke? Was it in a dream? Was it a sense of the peace that passes understanding? Was it when joy overwhelmed you? Was it when you felt convicted to make a change for the better – for your own good or someone else's good?

I'd encourage you to write it down or talk it out. Share it so that others might know that God is present and active. The Holy Spirit is God's present activity in our midst. God is at work now, and that's Good News! It's Good News we can claim in the midst of difficulty and uncertainty, but my hope for myself and for our world is that we rely even more on the Spirit to help us, teach us, and guide us into all truth.

I invite us to pray together...

Holy Spirit, I need you. We need you. You are our very breath. Fill us, shape us, and help us to do what you would have us do. Empower us to be bold and faithful witnesses of God's grace. Help us to use the gifts you've given and bear good fruit.

Help us to listen...**PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE**