

May 26, 2024

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Genesis 1:1-2 & John 3:1-8

Born of the Spirit

Welcome to Trinity Sunday! In the church calendar, Trinity Sunday follows Pentecost and can be thought of as a conclusion to the set of liturgical seasons that begin in the gray days of winter with Advent, followed soon after by Christmas and Epiphany. A few weeks later we hit Transfiguration Sunday (or Jazz Sunday here at PCO), continuing through Lent; into the glory of spring on Easter Sunday followed by the season of Eastertide and ending with the birthday party of Pentecost as we propel ourselves into summer. Next week we begin nearly six months of Ordinary Time. Ordinary refers to the word “ordinal” – related to things in a series and we will begin a pilgrimage of sorts throughout the summer. Before we begin this journey, we pause to consider how we understand God as three-in-one - Father, Son and Spirit.

This morning we will approach the Trinity through the Holy Spirit. Last week we heard about the Spirit blowing through the crowds of people gathered to hear Peter preach. It was a spectacle, noisy and chaotic, full of energy and excitement. This morning we hear about the gift of the Holy Spirit through a more personal and individual experience. Hear now these words from the Gospel of John, chapter 3:

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jewish people. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with that person.” Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Let’s set the stage for our scripture this morning. Jesus has just begun his ministry. He has called first disciples and performed his first sign – changing water into wine at a wedding banquet in Cana. He travels to Jerusalem and asserts his authority to the Jewish leaders, clearing the money-changers from the Temple courts and making the cryptic statement that if the Temple is destroyed, he will raise it again in three days. Chapter 2 of the Gospel of John ends with these words: “Now while Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.”

You can imagine the confusion in Jerusalem. Just who is this one who is making these claims and performing these signs? Enter Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, who sneaks a visit to Jesus at night. Nicodemus begins the conversation by affirming Jesus - calling him "Rabbi" and acknowledging that he is a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do the signs that Jesus does unless God is with that person.

Then Jesus and Nicodemus enter into a conversation that would be right at home in a contemporary sit-com or rom-com - the classic misunderstanding. It turns out the writer of the Gospel of John also liked to use this kind of dialogue to further the plot.

Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." This last phrase can also be translated from the Greek, as "born again." Nicodemus, being a religious leader, was well schooled so he immediately questions the logic of Jesus' statement. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Good question. He reminds me a bit of Sheldon Cooper in *The Big Bang Theory*, not able to appreciate the metaphorical approach of Jesus, taking Jesus' comments literally. Jesus, not one known for answering questions directly, responds with what seems like a straightforward answer: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

I can see Nicodemus nodding along – ok I am born from flesh, so I am flesh. And ok, what is born of the Spirit is spirit. His nodding stops and he gets a little quizzical look on his face Ok – I get that logically, but how is one born of the Spirit? Jesus sees the puzzled look on his face and responds, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

The wind blows where it chooses... Nicodemus as a religious leader and scholar of scripture must have immediately thought back to words from the beginning of Genesis that we heard Jennifer read: Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

The Spirit of God was hovering over the waters – over the chaos – over the void – and becomes the vehicle of creation, separating light and dark, water and land, birthing plants, animals and humans. It was the Spirit who transformed chaos into order. A different role than what we observed last week on Pentecost. Just who is this Spirit who blows where it chooses? Professor Robert Saler notes, "The linkage of wind to Spirit has a deep pedigree in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and here we see anticipated the role that the Holy Spirit (*or, at least, invocations of it*) has indeed played throughout the Christian tradition: while it has occasionally been seen as the stabilizer of church authority (i.e., a Spirit-guided

church cannot err, or a Spirit-filled prophet cannot be wrong), the Spirit has just as often served as a disrupter of business as usual within the church.”¹

When we consider our trinitarian understanding of God – relationally represented as Father, Son and Spirit or sometimes through their roles as Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer – it is the Holy Spirit which is our comforter and advocate on one hand, and the voice calling us from complacency to get up and do the sometimes disruptive work of promoting shalom and justice. Sometimes calming and taming the chaos and other times fanning the flames. The wind blows where it wills.

As one commentator has noted, “the earliest disciples experienced encounters with the Spirit as encounters with God directly — and at the same time, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as a guiding, challenging presence distinct both from him and from the One to whom he prayed. And so arose, over time, the church’s doctrine of the Trinity, the idea that God is properly conceived as both Three and One. Not three Gods — for that would miss God’s oneness. And not merely One — for that would miss God’s threeness, and wouldn’t do justice to the sense of encountering God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit.”²

I appreciate this insight of the value of encountering God through the Father God Jesus prayed to, and through the human person of Jesus and through the more nebulous Spirit. In our Reformed tradition, we dig deep into the scriptures of our parent God – the God of creation; the mother hen who nurtures relationships with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their family; who leads the Hebrew people from slavery and helps form them as a community of people through laws that reflect a love of God and love of neighbor.

We too listen for the voice of Jesus in our scriptures, and we seek to emulate his ministry of feeding and connection, of healing and welcoming. We hear that we have become his body on earth after his death and we are instructed to feed his lambs and tend his sheep, clothe the naked and visit the prisoner. In our forgiveness of others, in the grace we extend to family and strangers, in our acts of justice, we draw closer to the fullness of God.

The third expression of God – the Spirit often gets the short end of the straw. Relegated to Pentecost and a few other references throughout the year. And yet, Jesus told the disciples that it was the Spirit who would be their guide to understanding God when he was gone. It would be the Spirit who would accompany them when the world made no sense; when their lives fractured into tiny pieces. As people seeking to embrace the fullness of God, we need to embrace being “born of the Spirit.” And what exactly does that mean for us?

¹ Robert C. Saler. In the Lectionary. May 26, Trinity B (John 3:1–17) *Christian Century*. May 2024. Published online on May 20, 2024 at <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/may-26-trinity-b-john-3-1-17>

² SALT Project. Three and One: SALT’S Commentary for Trinity Sunday. Online at <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-trinity-sunday>

I believe the Holy Spirit is God still speaking in the world today, meeting us in the messy world in which we live. The work of the Holy Spirit is not easy work. It is the Holy Spirit who breathes into me as I seek God in prayer and scripture. It is the work of the Spirit who reconciles me to my siblings in Christ, so words of disagreement are transformed into sharing the bread and cup. My challenge is to recognize the still small voice of the Spirit amidst the noise and busyness of life.

In my days when I was spending my days in the lab as a neuroscientist, one of the biggest challenges was detecting a small change in a protein level or electrical activity in the brain after some manipulation. It was a constant battle of signal to noise ratio. And honestly this a pretty fair representation of my life on a lot of days. Careening from one activity to the next, the busyness of life providing so much background chatter that the Holy Spirit barely has room to get a word in edgewise. I need to slow down and make room for the Holy Spirit. I need to pay attention. I need to remember that the Holy Spirit can show up in unexpected ways. The wind blows where it wills.

Not only can, but the Spirit does show up in unexpected ways. I experienced this first hand in beginning of my ministry. It was shortly after I arrived at First Presbyterian Church in Hilton Head. I was asked to inter ashes in our columbarium of someone whose family lived out of state. It was my first time performing this sacred act. I was alone in the columbarium, not really sure if I should pray out loud or silently. Not really sure what I should say. Feeling a little foolish and a bit uncertain. And then an egret flew into the columbarium.

Now egrets were a common sight in the salt marshes and lagoons of the South Carolina Lowcountry. However, they are water fowl and they don't venture too far inland, so the church courtyard was not a place where you'd expect to see them. And yet, this egret silently stood guard while I interred the ashes, reassuring me that the right words would come. Reassuring me that God is with me. So for me, the Holy Spirit comes not as a dove, but as an egret. Or maybe a sandhill crane – the bird I saw on the side of the road when I was interviewing for the position here at PCO.

As Jesus said to Nicodemus, we must be born of the Spirit. We need the work of the Holy Spirit now more than ever. We need to the Holy Spirit to swoop in and sweep away the cobwebs of complacency that keep our privilege intact at the expense of others; we need the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts to pump love and grace to a world that so desperately needs an encouraging word.

And like Nicodemus we may be unsure, or really have no idea how we can be “born of the Spirit.” A starting point is letting go. As the words of preparation from writer and theologian, the Rev. Dr. Barbara Holmes says, “Transitions can only take place if we are willing to let go of what we have known, the worlds we have created, and our assumptions about “how things

are. To let go is the precursor to being reborn. We discard the baggage of societal expectations and, like a morning glory, open to the possibilities of each new day, each new moment, even if those possibilities are shadowy and disorientating.”³

Holmes goes on to talk about the tug of war we have with letting go and embracing new possibilities. Being born of the spirit means we let go of those things we guard so closely: “our stories (true or not), our lifestyles, and our belief systems . . . Letting go may be the only path toward rebirth. The truth of the matter is that we are clutching at nothing! The stripping has already begun. When the worst happens, our addictive desire for control and the futility of our desires are fully exposed. If we are wise, we open our minds, our hands, and our hearts, and let go.”

We let go. And the wind blows where it wills. And we trust. We trust in the God’s assurance that God will always be with us. We trust in the promises fulfilled to Abraham and Moses, to Ruth and to Mary. We not only trust in the joy of the empty tomb, that death has been defeated; we also live in that joy. We live in the joy of people created in love, redeemed by love, sustained with love. We will close our service this morning by singing *We Will Go Out in Joy*.⁴ We sang this last week on Pentecost and we are singing it again this morning. Let us embrace the words of this song: “Now anyone who is born of the Spirit, sing a new song of joy.” May it be so! Join me prayer.

³ Barbara Holmes. Letting Go of What We Have Known. Richard Rohr Daily Meditation. *Center for Action and Contemplation*. May 4, 2023. Online at <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/letting-go-of-what-we-have-known-2023-05-04/>

⁴ Andrew Donaldson and Hilary Seraph Donaldson. *We Will Go Out in Joy*. Glory to God Hymnal #589; Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.