

God the Holy Spirit

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Genesis 1:1-5 NRSV

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.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

John 14:15-18

[Jesus said,] “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. As for me, I will ask the Father, and he will give you another helper to be with you always, the Spirit of truth. The world is not able to receive the Spirit, whom it does not see and does not know. You know the Spirit, who lives among you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I am coming to you.”

Heidelberg Catechism

53 Q. What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?

- A. First, that the Spirit, with the Father and the Son, is eternal God.
Second, that the Spirit is given also to me,
so that, through true faith,
the Spirit makes me share in Christ and all his benefits,
comforts me,
and will remain with me forever.

Sermon

It’s the Pentecost Season and now, finally, three Sundays after Pentecost, with synod out of the way and new council members ordained, I can say something about the Holy Spirit. But I wonder about that. Who am I to say something about the Holy Spirit? Do I dare try to capture with words something, someone, as elusive as the Holy Spirit?

Even the Bible itself hesitates when it comes to revealing the Spirit. In Genesis 1, when God begins to create, is it “a wind from God” or “a powerful wind” that hovers over the shapeless waters? Or is it, in fact, the “Spirit of God”? It’s hard to say. Each of those is a good translation of the Hebrew. It’s hard to pin the words down to a single, simple meaning. So it is with the Holy Spirit.

It reminds me of my favorite Old Testament story. Moses is at the burning bush, and he wants a way to put God into words. He wants to gather up who God is into a name. But God says, “Not a chance! I will be who I will be” (cp. Exodus 3.14). God will not be gathered up and expressed in a word or in a handful of words. And I’m going to put the Holy Spirit into words this morning? How can that be?

Sometimes people say that the Holy Spirit is the “shy member of the Trinity.” They mean that the Holy Spirit does not tend to call attention to . . . What do we say here? . . . does not tend to call attention to itself? to himself? to herself? Even that question about the Spirit doesn’t have a single, simple answer.

In the biblical languages, every noun has a gender. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, the word for “spirit” is feminine: *she*. In the Greek language of the New Testament, the word for “spirit” is neuter: *it*. So, what do we say? To call the Spirit of God “it” diminishes the personhood of the Spirit, reduces the Spirit to a trait of God or to an expression of God’s character. The Spirit is more than that. As we say in our Catechism, in words that reflect the core of Christian tradition: “the Spirit, with the Father and the Son, is eternal God.” So the Spirit is every bit as personal as the Father and the Son. To call the Spirit “it” clouds that.

On the other hand, to call the Spirit of God “she” may be a good move grammatically, maintaining the personhood of the Spirit while preserving the Hebrew gender, but it’s also a novel move that calls attention to itself and implies more than we want to say. And again, the Spirit tends not to seek attention, but rather to direct attention to God and to Christ. Yet to call the Spirit of God “he” isn’t right either. To say “he” introduces maleness where it doesn’t belong. The Spirit of God is not male.

Back to the main point, with the pronoun question still unresolved . . .

By the way, that was a key issue at synod a few weeks ago. After lengthy discussion in committee and on the floor of synod, we approved revised translations of our confessions. The sticking point for some delegates was that the revised translations used masculine pronouns for God a lot less than the previous translations did. The fear was that somehow the change substantially altered our understanding of the nature of God. It hardly seemed so to me. In fact, the bit of the Heidelberg Catechism that we read this morning is from the revised translation, only I revised it a little more, because the new official translation retained two references to the Spirit as “he,” and as I said a moment ago, that doesn’t really fit with the language of Scripture.

All right, let’s try this again. Back to the main point, the Holy Spirit tends not to seek attention, but rather to direct attention to God and to Christ. So it may be difficult to say

much with certainty about the Spirit – in the same way that it was difficult for Moses to gather up God in a name or in a handful of words.

Actually, God’s evasive maneuver with Moses did point to the actual means of knowing God. “I will be who I will be,” God said. In other words, “You will know who I am as you see what I do.” As it turned out, what God would do is to live among his people and to go before them and to fulfill his old promises to Abraham. In a similar way, we know the Spirit of God. Jesus said, “You know the Spirit, who lives among you and will be in you” (John 14.17). We know the Spirit, in other words, by the Spirit’s presence among us and in us, by what the Spirit does, by where and how the Spirit leads.

This brings us back to the Catechism. “The Spirit is given also to me,” we say. This is an important statement. It’s one of those statements that reflects the genius of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformation was a mixture of good and bad, of sorrow and joy, of triumph and tragedy. One of the good things was the recapturing of strands of biblical revelation that had been ignored for too long. The statement in the Catechism that “the Spirit is given also to me” is one of those long-ignored strands. In an age when it had been too-long assumed that the Spirit was the endowment of the hierarchy and the magisterium of the church and not of the people of the church, the statement of the Catechism was revolutionary. It’s still revolutionary today.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, if you are in Christ, you have the Holy Spirit. You. Personally. Individually. Yes, the Spirit is given to the church. Yes, the Spirit lives among us together and is in us together. But the Scripture also says that the Spirit is in each one of us who belongs to Christ.

Do you have faith? Not faith that is free of doubts. Not faith that has no questions to ask. Not faith that isn’t sometimes befuddled and confused by God and by the ways of God in the world. But faith that, for all its weaknesses and for all its admixture of unfaith, faith that in the end is looking to Jesus as God’s great answer to the world’s persistent sorrow and pain, looking to Jesus as God’s solution to the ache and the twist of your own soul, looking to Jesus as God’s future dawning in the middle of the darkness?

Do you have faith in Jesus? Then you have the Spirit. Because faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. As our Catechism says elsewhere, it’s the Holy Spirit who creates faith in us through the gospel, and it’s the Holy Spirit who confirms that faith through the sacraments (cf. Q&A 65). Brothers and sisters in Christ, you have the Spirit.

Before he left his disciples, Jesus told them they wouldn’t be orphans. He said he would come back to them, through the Spirit. Jesus was called Immanuel, which means “God with us.” And God was with us through Jesus, living and breathing and dying and rising among us. But Jesus has ascended to the right hand of the Father. From there he has sent the Holy Spirit to us. Now the Holy Spirit is Immanuel. The Holy Spirit is God with us, God among us, God in us.

This raises lots of questions. This morning I have one set of those questions in mind. These questions don't have their answer in the pages of the Bible or in the Catechism – old translation or revised one – or in Calvin's *Institutes*. The questions I have in mind run like this: What is the Spirit saying to us? How is the Spirit moving us? Where is the Spirit leading us?

Now, of course, when we answer those questions, we will always check in with Scripture and check in with the wisdom of the ages, with the church's theological tradition. We'll always be careful not to be hoodwinked by our enemy, who masquerades as an angel of light. That said, we can look for the Spirit, we can listen for the Spirit, we can welcome the Spirit. I don't doubt that some of us have been doing that already.

The Spirit is given also to you, to you personally. Have you been watching? Have you been listening? What has the Spirit been saying to you? Where has the Spirit been leading you? Has the Spirit given you something to say to the rest of us? Is there a message we all need to hear – not the message I prepare and deliver Sunday after Sunday, but a message the Spirit has been preparing you to bear? A message that is burning like a fire in your bones? A message you have to speak?

For a long time, I've been saying, "Dare." For a long time, I've been saying, "Risk." And for a long time, I've been a chicken, not wanting to dare, not wanting to risk, not wanting to hear, not wanting to follow. I've been a chicken, not looking for and not listening for the Spirit. Maybe we all have.

Maybe it's just too weird for us, but how about I shut up now? How about we sit here for five minutes? How about we wait and see if the Spirit wants to say something to us this morning, something the Spirit has already been preparing one of us to say?