

Sermon Series – Church History

Week 4 – Pneumatology, The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit

Preached June 22, 2018 by Reverend Joylynn Graham

Back in the day things sure weren't like they are now.

I'm talking about the early days; back when it all began...back when our guts were on fire...

And everyone who saw us knew – they knew we had something.

Now those were the days!

Not at first mind you; at first we were pretty terrified. After all, we had seen him die; we watched as they buried the spear in him...

We could see just as plain as the nose on your face –

He was dead!

Wasn't he?

Sure there were those who insisted that he wasn't gone, that they felt his presence, but seriously, how were we to carry on?

And then there it was.

Suddenly it was as if we were on fire!

Suddenly we were alive with all that he had taught us.

Suddenly we were absolutely glowing with passion, courage, and love.

And stuff got done. We changed the world because the very Spirit of God that lived and breathed in Jesus, was living and breathing in us.

You should have seen us back then –

We were on fire...we changed the world!

It is good to remember and retell the stories of our ancestors in faith.

Especially when you're up to your neck in doctrine and dogma – it is good to remember what it was like back in the beginning.

It is good to pause, and remember...and take it in and imagine once again – even if only for a split second – the mystery, the wonder, and the awe as it was felt and experienced by our early ancestors.

It is good to put aside the logic and reason that always wants to find a rational explanation.

It is good to experience the joy of pure faith.

The Holy Spirit.

The Paraclete – or – Advocate.

The “Silent Partner” of the Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is arguably the biggest mystery of our faith; it is the most difficult element to talk about, yet it is also the element that we experience the most directly –

It is full of surprises; it is full of grace and comfort; it can carry you to the highest mountaintop or it can land you in the pit of despair; it goes by many different names, serves many different functions, and just as soon as you think you see it – it's gone. Or it has changed shapes – or something...

The Holy Spirit is a critical component of our Christian story, but, it's not something that can be understood – at least not in a linear, rational kind of way.

The Bible is full of references to the Holy Spirit.

The Hebrew word *ruah* which is usually translated as “spirit” appears all throughout the Hebrew texts as a way of describing the free and unhindered activity of God, either in creating or in revitalizing creation.

In the Old Testament, the Spirit is an instrument of divine action in nature and in the human heart. Before the creation of the world, the Spirit was brooding over

the waters¹. The Spirit inspired the triumphs of Joshua², and the strength of Samson³.

The Spirit enabled the prophets⁴ to communicate divine truth and it empowered human moral purity and holiness⁵. And the Spirit was especially associated with wisdom and understanding.

In the New Testament, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke describe a close relationship between the Holy Spirit and Jesus. Both Gospels tell us that Jesus was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary⁶." And during his baptism, the Holy Spirit is said to have descended on Jesus like a dove.

The sacredness of the Holy Spirit is affirmed in all three Synoptic Gospels which proclaim that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is the unforgivable sin⁷.

And the participation of the Holy Spirit in the Trinity is revealed in Jesus' final instructions to his disciples when he says to them: "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"⁸.

In the Gospel of John, emphasis is placed upon Jesus giving the Spirit to his disciples, and it is believed that it was the Holy Spirit whom Jesus mentioned as the promised "Comforter," or "Paraclete."⁹

And of course there was that time when the Spirit lit everyone up like Roman Candles and had them walking around and talking in strange languages – you know, the same day that the church was born.

Biblically speaking, the Holy Spirit is solidly a part of the divine package, but it is not something that we get to understand. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, "The wind

¹ (Gen. 1:2)

² (Deut. 34:9)

³ (Judges 14:6)

⁴ (Isa. 61:1)

⁵ (Ps. 51:11)

⁶ (Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:35)

⁷ (Matthew 12:30–32, Mark 3:28–30 and Luke 12:8–10)

⁸ (Matthew 28:19)

⁹ (John 14:26)

blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes...”¹⁰

The Spirit is always around us and within us; always pulling us and nudging us; always aching and rejoicing with us, but it is not something that we get to pin down and label, and it is certainly not something that we get to control.

Nevertheless, we have this entire branch of Christian theology known as Pneumatology which is of course, the study of the Holy Spirit and includes topics such as the personality of the Spirit, the deity of the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit throughout Scripture.

Up until early in the third century, there was no official doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and the Trinity was barely even a work in progress.

But then in the third century, the church experienced its first really big heresy showdown – the Montanist Heresy – and it was this showdown that created a perceived need to distinguish between true activities of the Holy Spirit, and false ones.

The Montanist Heresy began in the middle of the second century, when a guy named Montanus suddenly appeared on the scene claiming to be a prophet of the Paraclete. Montanus went from town to town in the same manner that Jesus had, and he taught that all believers were equal – including women – and that any believer could become a prophet because Christ had promised the Paraclete to all believers.

As you would expect, Montanus’ teachings were well received, and he managed to acquire a sizable following. Montanism spread – far and wide – and even Tertullian, one of the earliest and most well-known theologians of the Christian church was on board with Montanism.

But, by the third century, some of the “official” bishops were starting to feel a little anxious about job security, which led them to denounce Montanism as heresy, and Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon, felt led to clarify that the Spirit worked

¹⁰ (John 3:8)

primarily within the Church, whereas the Word, or Christ, worked within the whole of creation.

Irenaeus wrote a work titled “Against Heresies,” and in his work, he expanded on his ideas about the Spirit, describing it to be a ‘person’, just like the Father and the Son. He claimed that the Spirit and the Son are the sources of inspiration of Scripture and prophesy, and it was he who first suggested that the Holy Spirit is the finger of God, which wrote the Ten Commandments on stone tablets.

By the end of the third century many theologians were weighing in on the Holy Spirit, and not just as a separate and distinct being, but as an equally divine being.

Some saw the Spirit as God, and there was an ongoing debate as to the substance and the equality of the substance between God the Father, God the Son and the Spirit of God.

Then there were the Cappadocian fathers who took up the task of further formulating the concept of the Trinity.

By that point it was semi-official that the Spirit was an equally divine part of the team – except – there were fringe groups who didn’t see it that way and in the 4th century, one of these groups known as the Macedonians, began denying the full divinity of the Holy Spirit.

This belief was condemned by Pope Damasus, and at the Council of Constantinople in 381, the divinity of the Holy Spirit was finally made official through the declaration that the Holy Spirit was a distinct divine Person, equal in substance to the Father and the Son, and not subordinate to them.

There’s more – there is so much more, and I have greatly oversimplified what little I did share with you because if I didn’t we’d be here all day; but hopefully you can still see the level of complexity in all this –

Because it’s important –

Very important.

When Luke writes his account of the founding of this movement, he makes it clear that he is writing to a character named *Theopholous*, which in Greek means, *Lover of God*.

He is writing to a lover of God, and right from the beginning he confesses that he is writing “so that you may have faith.”

As lovers of God we read these ancient stories so that we may have faith.

Because Luke and the other NT writers were telling their stories in order to point to their experience of Jesus.

An experience of Jesus which led them to a new understanding of faith.

Suddenly faith did not have to be lived out in fear, even in the face of death.

Suddenly faith was not about being exclusive, for love knows no boundaries.

Suddenly faith wasn't even about religion which is so often used by the powerful to oppress and exclude the powerless.

Religion had always given people an illusion of living in an orderly and predictable world.

Religion had always led people to believe that outside the boundaries of their religion was a place of chaos.

That outside the boundaries of their religion lived the demonic or subhuman. So at all costs, you did whatever it took to remain within the boundaries – obedient and safe.

But then along comes Jesus who challenged all that by pointing to another way to peace that meant throwing the boundaries wide open.

Through his encounter with the Syrophenician woman, the Centurion, and the Samaritan leper, Jesus demonstrated that faith was not about exclusion; it was about inclusion, compassion, healing and justice.

And through this new understanding of faith, he inspired a massive following of the poor and the powerless, the rich and the powerful, the foreigner, the sinner, the saint, the outcast and the elite.

Jesus inspired a faith that depended completely on God – not on human agency, and he took it all the way to the cross.

So it was into that strange and upside down world that the writer of Acts offered his story of Pentecost which demonstrated the Spirit of God at work – right in the middle of all that chaos.

And it was brilliant! It was defiant! It was the biggest awakening ever! It was the birth of the church.

Imagine it – the followers of Jesus mourning the loss of the beloved leader, and then suddenly, like the rush of the wind young people have visions and elders have dreams; dreams and visions that threaten the established order with inclusion, compassion, healing and justice for everyone. Dreams and visions of calling their communities out of the constraints of the religious practices of their day, and into the chaos – where the Spirit of God is at work – where boundaries are crossed and taboos are broken.

Faith is a risk. It is a stepping out and beyond. It is a reliance and a trust in a power that is so much greater than ourselves, yet so impossible to grasp and define with our finite minds.

Faith, when done together and done right, is the most amazing thing a body will ever experience.

So right about now you might be thinking “well that was great for them, but it sounds like all we did was go from the frying pan into the fire.” You might be right.

Sadly, over the years, too many Christians have used these same religious constraints to enforce a kind of tribalism where eventually only one tribe becomes the chosen people and the chosen tribe gets to decide who’s in and who’s out so that order can be established, and everyone can be identified by the boundaries and the rules.

We are pretty much acting now just the same as people always have, full of fear and struggling with our faith, but if you take away anything from this today, I hope it is this: “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...”

I cannot tell you where the Holy Spirit lands in the pecking order of divinity, nor can I tell you what kind of goo it's made out of.

What I can tell you is that it's always there – just like the air you breathe – and if you let it, it will take you places you never even dreamed existed.

I know this to be true; I can't label and identify how that works; all I can do is live my life as faithfully as possible and tell my story whenever someone needs to hear it, and that is the best any of us can do.

I practice my religion so that I can grow in my faith; I read my bible because it was written so that I might have faith, and I worship because I love everything there is to love about God, Jesus and the Spirit.

And it is enough, because the Holy Spirit has my back – whatever that might mean and wherever that might lead.

It is enough for me and I hope it is enough for you – because it really is that simple and it really is that powerful.

May it be with you all according to God's word... Amen