

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year C, Epiphany 3
January 26, 2025

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

“Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.”

I do think there is a trend in the Episcopal Church to treat the Holy Spirit much like we might Miss Congeniality at a pageant— nice enough, but didn’t quite have that tiara spark. Or we think of the Spirit as my friend once described her third child to me: “She’s spunky. Mostly feral. I’m never quite sure where she is or what she’s up to, but out of the three kids, she’s most likely to make it out alive of whatever it is.”

To put our Gospel in context this morning, Jesus was baptized in the Jordan: “...and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”¹ Then, “Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, where for forty days he was tested by the devil.”² Our scripture today picks up after he emerges from the wilderness, and again, “filled with the power of the Spirit, [he] returned to Galilee.”³

Even as Trinitarians—both theologically and as a congregational identity—we tend to overlook the power of the Holy Spirit until it makes her appearance at Pentecost, descending in flame and chaos.⁴ And that may be because we don’t have a handle on the Spirit as well as we might think we do on God and Jesus. The Spirit, we are told, is a comforter; advocate; disturber; found in fire; found in water; found in breath; found (literally) in inspiration. Living with several Pentecostals while I was in Divinity School, one could very well get away with leaving a post-it note on the fridge saying, ‘I finished someone’s orange juice. The Holy Spirit made me do it.’ Spunky and feral and broad, the Spirit can feel as a catch all for all the qualities we do not regularly assign to God or Jesus.

¹ Luke 3:21-22

² Luke 4:1ff

³ Luke 4:14ff

⁴ Acts 2:1-13. The Acts of the Apostles are considered to be written by the author of the Gospel of Luke, so there is correlation between the two books.

But listen to the words the author of Luke uses to describe this Spirit: *it descends; it leads; it fills*. In our theological framework focused on fairly static entities such as a ‘creator’ or ‘savior’, the Spirit, for us, acts as verb, as conjunction. It moves us; it links us.⁵

Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, steps in to teach at his home synagogue, where (we are told with delightful and personal detail) it was his custom to attend weekly.⁶ The scroll is brought to him, he opens it to a particular set of passages, and he reads from the story of Israel’s promised liberation from exile as told by Isaiah.⁷ Setting it down, he tells his own people, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Usually the second half of this gospel reading is continued next Sunday, but this year we won’t hear it as the Feast of the Presentation falls on a Sunday and takes precedence⁸, so I’ll offer a spoiler alert: Jesus, filled with the Spirit, preaches from this scripture that liberation for one means liberation for all, which his own congregation sees as betrayal.⁹ Jesus may have received applause this week in the Gospel, but only verses after the adulation, this crowd will turn murderous. Just as after his baptism, still filled with the Spirit, Jesus is led into the wilderness to be famished and tempted, Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, both amazes and offends his congregation, putting his life at risk. And it will not be the last time he does.

Even in the presence of the divine; the presence of one of their own congregational kids; beloved scripture coming to life through Jesus’ own voice, there is still room for those listening to reject even the most common cores of what our God asks of us when it requires us to make room for others.

I like to think that Jesus knew his congregation’s probable response before he sat down to preach. I like to think that he thought to himself, ‘Well, maybe I’m overthinking this. Maybe they will get it.’ But most of all, I like to think that even though he knew the possible consequences, that the love he had for those people, grounded and amplified by the Holy Spirit, allowed him to trust in his God and to preach it anyways.

I want to believe this, because finding oneself in the presence of God makes us even more aware of the distance between where we are presently and where we wish to be—whether by our own perception of the holy before us, or by our realization that perhaps we are drawn back, again and again, into the smallness of ourselves. Sensing—knowing—believing—you can choose your own adventure here-- that the divine is not away from us, not on some far-off horizon, but in the very perimeter of our own body’s warmth and breath, comforts and disturbs. For if the divine can

⁵ https://research.ewu.edu/writers_c_grammar_basics/parts_of_speech_more: in case your grammar details are hazy.

⁶ Luke 4:15

⁷ cf Isaiah 58 and 61—what Jesus reads here is a conflation of those two chapters, whether on purpose by Jesus, or as part of the overarching theme by Luke.

⁸ https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearABC_RCL/HolyDays/Present_RCL.html

⁹ Luke 4:22-30

be as near to us as our morning breath, then the Holy One is close enough to know us, along with our peccadillos, all too well.

And it is in that space—that space between us and the Holy, that strange and discomfiting but also deeply intimate engagement, in which the Holy Spirit resides. That same Spirit which tells Jesus, *having not dipped one toe* into active ministry, that he is already beloved. That same Spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness to be famished and lonely and afraid and, regardless of how confident he sounded in his pithy answers to the devil when confronted with every possible temptation allowing him to refuse the easy road to the kingdom. That same Spirit which filled him as he entered into his new life centered among the messiness of total strangers as he began his ministry of healing and teaching. That same Spirit which accompanied him when he was among his own congregation, the place he knew and was known from childhood, and they still did not understand him, and therefore found him offensive.

Theologian Martin Buber reminds us that “The Spirit is not in the I, but between I and You”,¹⁰ in between us and the Holy, in between us and one another. It is that persistent calling out that the very interaction between entities holds not transaction but transformation. What lies between is as important as the parties engaging one another—perhaps even more.

Jesus’ ministry does not start easily. We all know the spoilers for every ending of this story—that the Good News ends with rage, that his ministry ends with death on the cross. But we also know this: that two thousand years later, thousands of miles from Galilee, we are still telling this story to one another, that it has not petered out. And that the same Spirit infusing Jesus prior each and every hardship facing him and his ministry remains even now, with us, here, as long as we know that the Spirit is always found in the spaces between us—as Buber continues, “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”¹¹

We may consider ourselves wiser than the congregation in Nazareth. Our passion and outrage for justice compels us again and again, and we may say to one another, yes, the liberation of our God is not simply for us and those we love, but for all. Jesus’ call to the congregation was not only to outgrow their parochialism—a sin we are *all* prone to owning—but to be filled ourselves with the Spirit which drives us into the hard work of enfleshing that liberation, but to see it’s very elemental nature in how we relate, respond, engage with one another, and with God. The Spirit, she is spunky, feral and scrappy, but she is only incarnated when the spaces between each of us are connected.

Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee.

¹⁰ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*

¹¹ Buber, *I and Thou*

Wherever your Galilee may be; wherever you go and incarnate the Good News, friends, wherever you bridge the I and the Thou, and the me and the ours, and the they and the them—perhaps the Holy Spirit—comforter, chaos-bringer, intimate breath—might be the one you call on these days. Because the Spirit, she is spunky. She is a survivor. And she is part of you.

Amen.