

Sermon 8

(Epiphany 3, 1/24/16)

The Holy Spirit/Nicene Creed

Lessons: Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10, Psalm 19, I Corinthians 12:12-31a, Luke 4:14-21

Prayer:

Father, help me today to speak words that are true and lovely, but if these words cannot be lovely, may they at least be true. Amen.

Well, I've got nothing. That's what I had to tell myself, day after day, for about a month as I meditated on what to say today.

My job, this morning, is to bring something to you, both meaningful and helpful, concerning the Holy Spirit, and to align it, in some way, with the Nicene Creed. The Creed is one of the church's' first, and most enduring expressions of belief in God as Trinity, that is, the One God, in three Persons. Now I believe, but I do not presume to fully understand. And the Person of the Trinity I understand least is the Holy Spirit. So day after day, I was coming up empty. But God is good. With prayer and a little help (actually, quite a lot of help) from my friends, I've come up with a little something.

Without attempting a full definition, I am prepared to say that the Holy Spirit is God revealed into our personal experience. God the Father *alone* may be viewed as distant, inaccessible, and irrelevant. God the Son, seen as just another wise man, or another prophet, who died another tragic death, does me no good. The graveyards are full of the bones of dead prophets. It is God the Holy Spirit who gives us the boldness to call upon God as *our* Father. It is God the Holy Spirit who enables us to know Jesus as our Lord, and Savior, and Friend.

And with no pretense at completeness, I'd like to bring to our attention a couple of specific ways that God becomes a living reality to us by means of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine with me, if you will, the near total despair of the disciples on the night of their last meeting with Jesus, right before his arrest and execution: Jesus was their world. Jesus was their life. They had left home and family and business and personal ambitions to follow this Rabbi from Galilee, whom they came to believe was the long awaited Messiah. He was the one sent by God to lead Israel back to the glory days of King David. Now, their Messiah, their hero, their world, was telling them that he was soon to be destroyed as a common criminal, and that he would be deserted by them all. . It is so easy, in the familiarity of this story, not to feel the depths of their desperation. Imagine, if you can, going from the mountain-tops of hope and glory, to the valley of hopelessness in the space of a day or two.

But it was to these very same broken and desperate hearts that Jesus said, "Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid, for my Father will send to you another Comforter, who will abide with you forever, even the Spirit of truth." Jesus promised, in the middle of their darkest night, to send, from the Father, the Comfort of the Holy Spirit who is God's presence experienced in the midst of what is otherwise a moment of hopelessness.

I have a practice I'd like to recommend to you. I am a lifelong, card carrying insomniac of the first degree. Sometimes my personal worries, anxieties I may have for my family and friends, and concerns for this poor old beat up world, sort of metaphorically gather into a cloud and sit on my chest. And any hopes I may have had for a restful night leave the room. However, even though I am a slow learner, I have, over the years, discovered that a sleepless night is a great time for prayer. Since I'm going to be up all night anyway, I might as well put the time to good use. I sometimes think that's why God invented insomnia in the first place. The Apostle put it this way, "Be anxious for nothing (instead) pray, with supplications and thanksgiving, (and the result will be) that the Peace of God that passes all understanding (he could have just as well have said "the

Comforter”) will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.” So I recommend this to all my fellow insomniacs. The Lord’s Prayer works just fine, but on my darkest nights a single comforting verse, or even a single phrase, repeated *meaningfully and mindfully* seems to work best for me. And the Comforter will come, and it works way better than counting sheep.

But, then again, there are times when the Holy Spirit comes, not as the Comforter, but as what I call The Devine Dis-comforter. The only problem with comfort is that we easily get too comfortable with our comforts. We human beings are complex creatures. We are often in need of solace, but just as often in need of a swift kick in the behind. Same God, same Holy Spirit, different circumstances. In The Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” And just a few sentences later says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.” The Holy Spirit is God experience both as Comforter in time of need, and as the Motivator who calls us to higher things and greater challenges. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is not about keeping all the rules and being nice, it is that hunger in every heart that is more basic than the need for food and drink, it is the unquenchable desire to be that being we were made to be. And the Holy Spirit is God’s commitment to us to help us get there, by whatever means necessary, whether it is a warm comforting hug, or a kick in the pants.

I have talked about the Holy Spirit as God in our personal experience, but we are, you may recall, Catholics of the Cosmos, so it is appropriate (don’t you think?) to expand our perspective just a bit.

There is a near unanimous consensus among the more thoughtful, meditative and prophetic voices among us that we, the human race, are embarking upon a period of great transition unlike anything the world has thus-far experienced. I am not here referring to the wild-eyed fanatics and extremists, but to the more thoughtful ones, those who might actually know a little something. They say that this leaking, listing ship of humanity may be entering into phase of our voyage just as important and far reaching as that aeon 20 centuries ago when God became a carpenter, walked the dusty roads of Palestine for a few years,

was executed just outside of Jerusalem, and who then proceeded to turn the world upside down. Some of these thoughtful, prophetic voices from within the Christian Tradition are naming this tumultuous time the Age of the Holy Spirit.

One of the major characteristic of these transitional periods is that they tend to be times of great dis-comfort. Some of the things we thought were real, may turn out to be illusions, some of the things we thought were built on solid rock may prove to be built on sand and washed away in the rising tide of the Spirit. Mary, the mother of our Lord, speaking about another time of great change, said “the mighty are pulled down from their places, and the lowly are exalted. The hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty.” Jesus said “men’s hearts will fail them from fear and from looking after those things that are coming upon the earth.” This age of the Great Transition is going to be the Age of the Great Fear, for many.

But that’s all right. God has not left us without a Comforter, and times of great sea-change are also times of great creativity, and unprecedented joy.

Didn’t Jesus say, on the same night he spoke of the Comforter, “I have said these things that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.”?

Didn’t Nehemiah just this morning tell the people of Israel, during another tumultuous time, “Weep not...for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”?

Didn’t Jesus say in our Gospel this morning that, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor...(and) today these words are fulfilled in our hearing.”?

Didn’t Isaiah the prophet, say, “Comfort ye, Comfort ye, my people...for the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.”?

There is a little church on the corner of 1st and Kentucky in a poor neighborhood in Fairfield California, and she too, needs a little comfort sometimes. And she too will play her part in this coming tumultuous age. What a joy, then, and

what a comfort it is to be able to gather as the living heart-beat of the body of Christ and say, as one body, that

We believe in the Holy Spirit,

The Lord, the Giver of Life,

Who proceeds from the Father,

And with the Father and the Son

Is worshiped and glorified,

And who has spoken through the prophets,

Amen.

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