

Spirit, Spirit: A Cosmic Drama

Pentecost

Text: Genesis 1:2; John 3:6

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The consternation in the heart and mind of a Nicodemus brought him to Jesus, confused as to exactly what was going on in the life and ministry of this one, this respected teacher of Israel. And so, he came to him, saying, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus responds with the claim that one must be born again, from above. Nicodemus' confusion only deepens. He says, "How can this be?" And I suppose that all religion arises out of those deep existential questions, from whence have we come? Whither are we going? And what is the meaning of it all, the purpose, the intention? What is our life? With Nicodemus, I think, from time to time we all say, "What does this mean? How can this be?"

We keep ourselves busy for much of our lives, frantically pursuing our penultimate goals, but there are those moments that dawn upon us, maybe when we take a candle as a young person, maybe as a parent holding an infant at a baptismal font, maybe some moment with the bread in our hand; or at a moment of great fear, tragedy or loss, or deep joy and delight. Sometime or another, we ask, "How can this be? Whence have we come? Whither are we going? What does it mean?" Because we are human, and after a cosmic drama of 15 billion years, the likes of us have emerged on planet earth, able to wonder about it all, becoming when, how, who knows but, at some moment, conscious, self-conscious, aware, aware of the other, finding voice, having language, able to express deep thoughts. And before the mystery of life, its wonders causing us awe, its terrors causing us dread, we ask, "What does it mean? Where are we going? And what is this human existence into which we've entered?"

That is the source and the origin of the wide diversity of religions, belief and religious practice throughout the ages and around the world. That was no less the case with the Hebrew poets and prophets. Interestingly, the clear statement of God's creation in Genesis did not arise until that people had a national identity for centuries. The creation account in Genesis arose out of the situation of exile, when that people in their alienation and estrangement had lost their confidence in their Yahweh God, believing as did most ancient peoples, that God was the God of the winners, or that the winner's God was God. Then, in the midst of that

rather despairing exilic community, there arose a voice, a poet, who stirred them to the depths, reminding them that the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob was none other than the Creator of the heavens and the earth, and he wrote that marvelous poem, "In the beginning, God ..." There was an earlier account, somewhat less sophisticated, that focused on the human person, the creation of humankind.

In those stories we see a people orienting themselves and their lives around the sharp focus of a God Who spoke and called all things into being. Obviously, the conception of the natural world, the universe, the cosmology reflected in those Genesis accounts was representative of the understanding of the age in which the poet wrote. It was a three-storied universe, the heavens above, the waters beneath the earth, and God was the Great Mechanic, the Great Architect, the Great Designer, the Great Clockmaker, as it were. God was a being, a Superbeing. God was like us, personal, only bigger, more so. God was the Supreme Being Who, from beyond, out of the depths of eternity, decided to call into being that which was not, and did it like a designer, like a contractor, like one who constructs a model. There was a kind of naiveté about that account, as we look at it 25 or more centuries on. The world is not the world that was conceived of by the biblical writer. But, ancient people were not naive. Ancient people had all of the questions that we have. Those creation accounts are an attempt to give account of the reality of the universe and of the human experience. And there is a profundity there. The Spirit of God - in the Hebrew language, spirit, breath, wind are all translated by the same word, *Ruach* - brooded over the chaos. Over that soupy chaos, the poet tells us, the breath or the wind of God brooded or hovered, and out of the chaotic stew, through the brooding of the breath of God, came the cosmic miracle of which the ancient writer knew only a little.

In the other account in the second chapter, you see the beautiful simplicity of this Creator God coming down to the earth that was created and scooping up a handful of mud, fashioning a body and breathing in life so that the man became a living soul. Such an insight saw the human person connected absolutely with the elements of the earth, but having something more, that spirit dimension that created the possibility of consciousness and awareness and attentiveness. Rooted to the earth but beckoned upward by the Spirit, the human person comes from the hand of the Creator God.

The Psalmist sang about it, sang about it with delight and with joy. "Every living thing, the whole vast created order, all of it emerged at the behest of the Creator's Word Whose breath, whose Wind, whose Spirit enlivens it all. You remove your Spirit and we die. You bestow Your Spirit, and we live." The Psalmist sang about the God Who is life, the life of the world, the life of all that is.

The Hebrew tradition out of which we have come is a tradition that is centered in that breath of God, Spirit of God, wind of God. Poets and prophets with vivid imagination envisioned a whole new world endowed with Spirit, looking for the

day when one would come, filled with the Spirit. The story goes on to the point at which one was conceived by the Holy Spirit, according to the Gospel, Jesus by name, in whose life and ministry there developed that movement from which we stem, a Christian Church, celebrating the birth of that movement on the day of Pentecost, according to Luke. For Luke would have us see that that which happened in the wake of Jesus was nothing more than the continuation of that activity of the breath of God, the breath and the wind of God that swept upon that early gathering of disciples, empowering them, enlivening them, firing them to go out and to tell the story, the Good News of what God had done in Jesus Christ.

So, on Pentecost we recognize that we are preeminently a people of wind, the people of breath, the people of Spirit, that it is Spirit that marks us as humans, that causes us to wonder, to raise those deep questions and to seek after God.

Nicodemus came to Jesus in his confusion and Jesus confused him even more. "You must be born again," or "You must be born from above," or "from beyond." That new birth, if we were to understand it today, would have to be translated from the understanding of Jesus, because Jesus didn't know our cosmology. Jesus saw a distinction between the flesh and the Spirit, and we certainly understand what he meant. All of us know and of some of us it is true that we are dead while we live. And certainly that was the reality to which Jesus was pointing, the possibility of living a human existence without being human, being a human automaton without spirit, without consciousness, without awareness, without attentiveness, without that spirit dimension, that depth dimension. But we would have to say today, in the light of what we know about this amazing cosmic drama into which we have been caught up, that there is no such thing as flesh and spirit, for there is only one cosmic river of energy.

Fifteen billion years ago there was an explosion, the Big Bang, as the physicists speak of it today; 15 billion years ago, Jesus, would you believe it? They tell us it's not like an explosion of TNT, but rather, the explosion of a musical chord, perhaps the most famous chord in all the world, Beethoven's Fifth. You know how it begins. It's "Boom, boom, boom, boom." That's it, you see, the Big Bang. It is a chord that begins to reverberate outward, outward, outward, and as it goes, it does not fill space, it creates space; it does not take time, it creates time, so time and space are expanding in resonant circles outward, outward, outward, for 15 billion years. Here we are at this late point of development in a cosmic drama, and we understand that we have been created with spirit that has become aware of it all. Fifteen billion years until there emerged the likes of us, who could ask "from whence did we come," and "whither are we going," and "what is the meaning of it all?"

We have discovered that we are not flesh and spirit, but we are enspirited flesh, for we know that energy and mass are interchangeable, and that our mass is but dammed up energy, coalesced for a time and then released in another form. We find ourselves little whirlpools of meaning in that cosmic river that has been

flowing for 15 billion years, and if we cannot discover the meaning of it, we have become those who can give meaning to it and create meaning for it. We create meaning in our lives in community with one another, trusting in that process that has been emerging, baffled by the mystery of its beginning, and being without a clue as to the manifestation of its culmination, but in the meantime, trusting God Who is spirit, Who enspirits, enlivens, fires the imagination and creates between us and among us human community.

As you know, this past week Nancy and I spent a few days in New Jersey and we were privileged to hear the English scholar, Karen Armstrong, who spoke twice last Tuesday, in the morning on "The History of God." In 1993 she published her rather significant work, *The History of God: 4000 years of the human understanding and conception of God*. Then in the afternoon she spoke of "*The Future of God*," and she addressed, I thought, very profoundly the present state of the human family. We don't get a very good feel for that in Western Michigan, but the institutional Church is certainly in trouble, and the manifestation of the great religious traditions around the world that were once thought to be passé are experiencing a resurgence. There is confusion on every hand. Karen Armstrong is currently researching a book on Fundamentalism, which she sees as the desperate human attempt to resuscitate the God of the Bible, the God of that cosmology of the Genesis writer, that God "out there," that Clockmaker, Designer, King and Ruler. That conception was reflective of the understanding of the day but cannot carry the freight in our day. She said in all of the monotheisms, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, even in some of the Eastern religions, there is currently a fundamentalism which is a kind of a fanatical attempt to resuscitate an old conception of God, bringing that which is dead and to bring "Him" crashing back into history, the God that has long since been dead.

Well, are we then in a period of atheism? Much of the world is, notwithstanding the resurgence of that fundamentalism manifest around the globe. In the long haul, where we are going is into the darkness of atheism. But then she said a most interesting thing, and I believe she's right. You don't have to worry about atheism, not even if you're making your Confirmation today, because atheism is not a rejection of God. It is simply a rejection of an inadequate conception of God.

Years ago, J.B. Phillips, who paraphrased the New Testament, wrote a book whose title says it all: *Your God Is Too Small*. We are living in a period of time when the conception of God that has come with us out of the past is not adequate anymore to connect with our human experience. That conception makes no sense of this 15-billion-year river of energy that is flowing, God knows where. But, in the meantime, in the darkness it's as the poet Keats claimed: You don't just sit down and write a poem. You wait in the darkness. You wait in the darkness until the poem writes itself. And so, now, we don't know so much, and there are big questions afoot. But if we trust, if we have faith to believe, then we will not idolize those formulations and conceptions that have come to us. We will recognize where they are inadequate, where they can no longer connect with our

experience, no longer give orientation for our human life. We will wait, wait in the darkness, trusting, not knowing what will be, but knowing what can no longer be.

And I want to say to you young people, those who tell you so clearly all about God, don't know, because we don't know; we trust that Mystery, and we have seen the reality of the Mystery revealed in the face of Jesus and we have experienced the breath of God in community. Thus we know all will be well. Let God be God and let us with confident trust move into the future unafraid, for you see, Pentecost keeps happening. Pentecost is simply the presence of the Spirit.

In the words of the poet,

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights of the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs -
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings

Pentecost. Breath. Spirit. God. Wonder. Wonder!