

BREATH, WIND, SPIRIT

I picked 3 sets of verses that I thought could be helpful in approaching different aspects of this Holy Spirit we believe in. The reason I picked these 3 sets of verses is that each one begins to focus on or hints at qualities of the Holy Spirit I find helpful to be reminded about.

The word that is translated spirit in the Old Testament Hebrew is ruwach (roo'akh), and as I said earlier, the Greek word for spirit in the New Testament is pneuma. But both of these words could also be translated as breath or wind. There are used somewhat interchangeably.

We see this right away in the Creation story in Gen 1:2. My New RSV Bible says the *wind* of God swept over the face of the waters, your Bible might say the *Spirit* of God hovered over the face of the waters, and others might read the *Breath* of God was over the waters. Wind. Spirit. Breath. To organize my thoughts, these 3 ways of interpreting the same word seemed helpful. Let's start with breath.

The Gospel text is from John 20:19-22. The setting is after Jesus has been crucified and resurrected but had not yet appeared to the 12 disciples and they were holed up in a house, not exactly knowing what to do next or what to think.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said "Peace be with you."

After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

This connection between breath and spirit is found all over Scripture. In Genesis 2 we read how God breathed life into Adam, in our Old Testament lesson today we read how bones were breathed on and brought back to life and this new life was connected to God putting His spirit in His people.

Why the connection between breath and spirit? I think God wants us to clearly understand that the Holy Spirit is the source of life. Even when we look at the birth story of Jesus, and part of the creed we looked at last week, we see Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit - we need to remember it was by the power of the Holy

Spirit that Jesus was brought to life in human flesh. The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann says this about the Holy Spirit:

"The Holy Spirit is the unrestricted presence of God in which our life wakes up, becomes wholly and entirely living, and is endowed with the energies of life."

Also, I love the quote from Irenaeus, the early church father: "the glory of God is a human being fully alive." It's the role of the Holy Spirit in our life to enable us to live fully, to be fully alive.

I have a friend whose baby who didn't breathe for 7 minutes after being born. In her dazed state, all she remembers is praying: "Holy Spirit breathe life into my son," over and over until he began breathing. The Holy Spirit, the breath of God, is the source of our life.

So what does this mean? I think when we are open to the Spirit; we see and experience life more fully. It doesn't mean that our circumstances are necessarily dramatic and flashy, in fact, they can be pretty ordinary. But the Holy Spirit enables us to live our ordinary lives, see our circumstances as having godly significance, as being holy. And when we experience them as such, we become fully awake to life, fully alive.

I think one reason I more go through the motions of living rather than being fully alive is that I often don't see my ordinary life, as having much godly purpose or significance. I can be moving so fast, living defensively, anxiously caught up in the tasks of life, that life just seems like one giant list of things to do. I am a big list maker. And I love crossing things off my list. I've mentioned to some of you already that I'll even add something on the list I've already done, just to get the satisfaction of crossing it off. Yet the problem with this way of living is that I am so driven to get stuff done, I miss the holy life God sets before me. I don't think God is keen on us crossing things off lists.

The Holy Spirit is constantly trying to get our attention to see and live in the holy moments. We so often miss these moments:

- like the simple affirming comment from a friend that might just go right past us because we are moving onto the next thing,
- like the delight of our child's thought process we miss because we only half listen to what he's saying,
- like the nudge to make a phone call we ignore because we're so busy,
- or like the beauty of the Fall season we miss because we don't think we have time for a walk.

Sure the Holy Spirit can and does work in dramatic ways, but I think most of the time the Spirit is longing to help us live more fully, be more alive in the ordinary stuff of our lives. I think we probably need to slow down our lives so that we can be more attentive to the holy moments the Spirit is inviting us to see and experience.

A question we might ask ourselves is: How is the Holy Spirit inviting us, inviting you to live life more fully?

The Spirit is the source of life, but also supports life. In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to the Spirit as our paraclete, translated in English as our advocate or counsellor. An advocate is someone who is on our side, speaks up for us, defends us. A counsellor is someone who encourages us to become more whole.

In Romans, Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit as interceding for us to God the Father, praying for us when we don't know how to pray. The disciples were told in the book of Acts not to worry about what to say when coming before authorities and needing to speak – the Holy Spirit would give them the words to say. The Holy Spirit is our life support. I think it is this role of God the Holy Spirit that fits so well with the song Kurt sung – God believes in you.

Example: A number of years ago I was having a tough time and decided to go away for the day – a mini- retreat, to pray, journal and be with God. I was feeling pretty crummy about myself – feeling like a lousy mom, wife, and friend. During that time alone, I had the thought I was to confess my sin. And I remember thinking,

Thanks a lot God, you know I already feel crummy enough about myself; do you want to rub my face in it?

And then I had this surprising idea come to me. I now recognize it as a prompting of the Holy Spirit – the idea was “Margie, I want you to confess your self-hatred.” I knew I didn't exactly have a highly inflated view of myself, but I hadn't recognized how strong these negative feelings were - until that moment. And it had never occurred to me that carrying these negative feelings of myself was a sin – sort of upside-down pride.

I then read a Psalm where the Psalmist speaks of God's delight in his children, and I remembered the phrase from Psalm 17, “keep me as the apple of Thine eye.” God was giving me a new perspective on how to see myself as God sees me. I was overwhelmed with the reality of the Holy Spirit being for me, tenderly encouraging me, supporting me.

The Holy Spirit delights in supporting us in life.

To believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe: The Holy Spirit, like breath, is the source of life.

Let's take a look at the next way the word would be translated. The Holy Spirit is also like wind. Given the cyclones we've had this season, you don't need much imagination to see the wind as a powerful source of change. This image reminds us that the Holy Spirit is the source of change.

I'd now like to read from Acts 2:1-4: (The Pentecost Story)

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

As we see in our Pentecost passage, the Holy Spirit came with a sound like a mighty wind. The folks there were filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke in different languages, and if we look further in the text, we see they still understood each other. Not only that, later in Acts 2 we see Peter, the fearful impetuous apostle who previously denied Jesus, now boldly proclaiming the Lordship of Christ. .

At Pentecost things change. At Pentecost the church is born. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit, there is not only unity of understanding but a real change in the lives of the people there. Timidity turns into boldness. Division turns into unity. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, has the power to change lives then and has the power to change lives now.

Example: It was about 15-18 years ago that through a variety of circumstance, I was drawn to the ministry of spiritual guidance, direction, whatever you want to call it. Yet, I knew this wasn't exactly something where one just put up a shingle saying spiritual direction available, nor was it something you marketed – wouldn't have been my best move if I went up to folks and said "would you like me to be your spiritual director? So I prayed. And I tried to be open to whatever God would have for me. Well it seems like not very much time went by when I got a call from someone I'd never met – she had heard me preach and decided to call me because she was struggling in her faith and wondered if I would talk with her. We met only once but our time together was quite significant for me.

Shortly after that I had another person I hadn't met, though recognized as someone who regularly came to Bethany, come up to me after worship and say fairly bluntly, I think

God told me that I'm to get together with you, but I'll tell you right now, I don't know what I think about Jesus. We ended up meeting regularly for quite awhile.

I see the Holy Spirit's movement in these early encounters. I see them as gifts from the Holy Spirit, guiding me on in following this change in my life, this new sense of call, even though it was a bit out of the ordinary, especially that long ago.

You might imagine the reactions I'd get at a cocktail or dinner party with some of Jeff's clients, (he was at the law firm then) when the typical question "Margie what do you do?" came up and in bolder moments I'd say I'm a spiritual director. Kind of an awkward moment and kind of a conversation stopper. Yet, surprisingly, this kind of reaction didn't discourage me – embarrass me maybe, but not discourage me.

Because, give the way things were unfolding, I believed God was bringing about this change in my life.

A question worth asking is: What changes might the Holy Spirit be bringing about, or wanting to bring about, in your life?

But the Holy Spirit isn't an agent of change just in our personal lives. The Holy Spirit is an agent of change on a corporate level. Many of you have heard the stories of how people associate Britain's ending of the slave trade with the Holy Spirit being an agent of this change.

Wilberforce, a man of prayer, as well as lots of other folks who were praying, saw the abolition of slavery in England as very much a God thing – seeing this radical change as a movement of the Spirit. The same stories can be said about abolishment of Apartheid in South Africa.

To believe in the Holy Spirit is to believe: The Holy Spirit, like wind is the source of change.

The final image of the Holy Spirit I want to talk about is the image of the Spirit as a Person. I want to look at the Holy Spirit as a Person of the Godhead. Our Scripture text is 2Corin 13:13, the simple benediction from Paul, he concludes the letter with, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God (meaning God the Father), and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." This passage reminds us that the Person of the Holy Spirit is the source of all fellowship.

Paul says, "May the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you". This fellowship of the Holy Spirit can happen on more than one level. One of them is simply the recognition of the community and fellowship within the Godhead. The last two weeks we've talked about

believing in God the Father and God the Son, and the Person of the Spirit is in fellowship, in community with the Father and the Son.

We speak of God in 3 persons. I read that when the early church used the term person here, they weren't thinking of the western view of the individual that we think of – an autonomous self – rather, person was less a term for an individual as it was someone in relationship to, or relationship with, someone else. Person was a word that implied relationship with another.

When we speak of the 3 persons of the Godhead, we are to immediately think of relationship, of community. We worship a God whose very nature is relational, communal. Inherent in the Godhead is community, mutual community and reciprocity.

One of my favourite icons is Rublev's icon of the Trinity. The hands and eyes of the 3 persons of the trinity are positioned in such a way that our looking at them doesn't make us focus on any one of the persons – our gaze automatically moves or flows from one to another, reflecting that no one person of the trinity is subordinate to the other.

I think that some of us may think of the Holy Spirit as kind of the support role in the Godhead, and as such, may think of the Holy Spirit as subordinate – as Pinnock says in his book *Flame of Love*, “We frequently view The Spirit as the third person and in the third place”.

One member of our home group said he realized he kind of saw the Holy Spirit as Christ's younger brother, or, I might add, younger sister - since the Hebrew word for spirit is feminine – and being a younger sister to a brother 5 years older than me, I certainly know how subordinate that role can be...) But that isn't the case here – there is a mutuality in community in the Godhead.

The “fellowship of the Holy Spirit” also refers to the relationship between the Holy Spirit and each one of us, a relationship that invites each one of us to intimacy with God. As Paul says in Romans, because of the Holy Spirit, we can now be God's children, adopted children of God the Father. Because of the Holy Spirit, we are now able to have an intimate loving relationship with God, like the intimacy between parent and child.

Finally, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is manifest in the community of the body of Christ, that is, the church. Remember that according to Scripture, the church is to be the visible presence of Christ in the world now that Jesus is no longer here in the flesh.

This is a wee bit remarkable. For some crazy reason, God chose us, the church, as fallible and messy as we are, to be God's presence in the world. And it is precisely in our love for

one another that we reveal this presence. As that old Christian song of the 60's goes "they'll know we are Christians by our love."

The Holy Spirit is essential for the ongoing fellowship of the church. It is the Holy Spirit that gives each of us spiritual gifts which, as Paul says, are talents and abilities not to be used for our selfish ends but to be exercised for the building up of the body. Similarly, it's the Holy Spirit that gives us the "fruits of the spirit" mentioned in Galatians –qualities like love, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control. Like the gifts, these fruits are also to help nurture and sustain relationships within the church.

I am convinced that nothing delights the Holy Spirit more than when we actually live in fellowship and community with one another and nothing grieves the Spirit more than unresolved dissensions and disagreements we may have with one another. The Person of the Holy Spirit is the source of all fellowship and community within the church. And it is this very fellowship and community that reflects the presence of God to our world.

To believe in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, then, means to believe in the Holy Spirit as a person of the Godhead that lives in mutual relationship and community within the Trinity. To believe in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit means to believe in the intimacy the Spirit offers to us as individuals. And to believe in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit means to believe in the community of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. A question we might ask ourselves, as individuals and as a church body is: How are we experiencing the fellowship of the Holy Spirit?

- Like breath, the Holy Spirit is the source of life – inviting us to live life fully.
- Like wind, the Holy Spirit is the source of change, whether it's individual change or corporate change.

And as a person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit is the source of our fellowship.

My hope is that these words help us see the richness of the life offered to us by and in the Holy Spirit, and may the words from the creed "I believe in the Holy Ghost" have more meaning to each of us as we recite them together and live into their truth.

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