

The Story of God and Us: Holy Spirit and the Church

Traditional Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/439733034>

Contemporary Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/439740611>

Gethsemane Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/439728439>

Pastors' Discussion: <https://vimeo.com/439127823>

Sermon Workbook: <https://www.stlukesmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GodandUs-workbook-web.pdf>

The Holy Spirit is God's presence on earth and is the way in which Christians can know God. In other words, any experience we have of being connected to God is through the Holy Spirit. In Romans, Paul says that it is the Holy Spirit who makes it possible for God's love to be poured into the hearts of believers.

The Spirit, as one of the three persons of the Trinity, existed at the beginning of time and is not a "New Testament" creation. The Spirit is present in creation – hovering over the waters and when God breathes into man, giving him life. The Spirit rests on people who God has chosen to lead the Israelites – from Joshua to some of the judges to the kings Saul and David to prophets such as Ezekiel and Isaiah. That same Spirit is present at Jesus' baptism and in the hearts of the disciples after Jesus' ascension into heaven. And it is the same Holy Spirit that is present in all of us.

In one of his catechetical lectures, Cyril of Jerusalem warns, "Let no one therefore separate the Old from the New Testament; let no one say that the Spirit in the former [covenant] is one, and in the latter [covenant] another."¹ The same Spirit hovered over the face of the waters in creation, descended like a dove on Jesus when he was baptized, and rushed through the room where the apostles were gathered during Pentecost.

Though God implants the Spirit in everyone at birth, the way that the Spirit functions in Christians is different. The presence of the Spirit in humankind makes possible "extraordinary capacity for virtue and wisdom."² So when scripture describes a person as being filled with the Spirit, it does not imply that it is the first time the Holy Spirit has been introduced to their lives. Rather, it means they have opened themselves to the Spirit so that "their skill, their wisdom, [is] increased to an extraordinary extent."³

Jesus refers to the Spirit in the Gospel of John as the *paraclete*, variously translated as advocate, counselor, one who intercedes, comforter, or one who comes alongside. Each of these functions allows the Spirit to be a guide in the lives of believers. God's wisdom, which

¹ Cyril of Jerusalem, "Catechetical Lecture 16," New Advent
<<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310116.htm>>.

² John R. Levison, "Filled with the Spirit: A Conversation with Pentecostal and Charismatic Scholars," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20.2 (2011): 217.

³ John R. Levison, *Filled with the Spirit* (Cambridge, U.K.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. 2009), 57, 62.

was secret and hidden, is now available to all believers through the Spirit. In his farewell discourse in John, Jesus tells his disciples that the Spirit will guide them in truth after he is gone, and the Spirit does the same thing for us by pointing the way to the truth. Through the Spirit, Christians remember all of the things that Jesus taught:

John 14:26: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

The Spirit also helps us grow. The first chapter of Mark describes the Spirit descending on Jesus during his baptism, and then immediately driving him into the wilderness for forty days while he was tempted. The wilderness often results in more growth than time spent in paradise where testing does not occur. The Holy Spirit often leads and nudges us to places that stretch us and where we are forced to grow.

Life in the Spirit produces fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Christians grow into the character of God when they pay attention to the working of the Spirit. This attentiveness allows the Spirit to sanctify believers so that they are transformed into holy beings and drawn closer to God and become more like Jesus.

In Matthew 28:18-20, after Jesus' resurrection, he commissions his disciples by giving them authority to make disciples of all nations in the name of the Holy Spirit. **So the Holy Spirit is given to us not only for our personal transformation and encouragement, but also so that we can move the mission of God forward through the church.**

In the Book of Acts, the Holy Spirit planted the church at Pentecost, and the Spirit has inspired the church throughout history. The translation of Spirit as "wind" reminds us that the church is living, breathing group and is not a stagnant building.

In 1 Peter 2:9-10, Peter describes the church as a group of people who have been called out of darkness and into light and who are charged with sharing that light with others.

⁹ You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people who are God's own possession. You have become this people so that you may speak of the wonderful acts of the one who called you out of darkness into his amazing light.

¹⁰ Once you weren't a people, but now you are God's people. Once you hadn't received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

As Tom mentioned in the Sermon Stretcher video, the Metrodome in Minneapolis, where the Vikings played from 1982 to 2013, has a unique quality. The air-supported tensegrity structure has a pressure differential between the indoors and outdoors that keeps the dome inflated. The stadium uses mainly revolving doors to maintain the higher indoor pressure, but there are a number of standard doors, and when you exit through one of those, you get the experience of being pushed outside. This is the way the church should function as well. When we near the doors at the end of the service, we should feel propelled out by the worship we've just participated in so that we are compelled to go out and live like Jesus.

The church is not made up of a group of perfect, like-minded folks. It is comprised of **all** of the people that confess Jesus as their Lord and savior (and has the capacity to be comprised of

everyone in the world if they turn to Jesus). The church is stronger because it is inclusive – Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 12 when he compares the varied parts of our physical body to the many folks that make up the church.

It is our selfish tendency to think “everyone should be just like me,” but Paul points out that if the body were comprised of nothing but eyes, what would happen to the hearing? Or if the whole body were ears, what would happen to the sense of smell? We also have an innate sense of jealousy that can make us want to be like someone else, but Paul addresses that as well, saying that if the foot feels badly because it’s not a hand, it is still an important part of the body. We are, together, the body of Christ.

In Jeremiah 29:7, the prophet tells the people that God wants them to promote the welfare of the city where God has sent them. Part of our calling as a church, as the body of Christ, is to work to improve our community and our circles.

In its engagement with the world, the church must be cautious not to become a mere social institution or tool to further the goals of various earthly powers. In his sermon *A Knock at Midnight*, Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.” When Christianity becomes too tied to earthly powers, the church becomes unable to maintain her divine calling as it is concerned with by temporal influences and powers.

Rather, the mission of the church is defined clearly by the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” The church should be turned inside-out, existing for the sake of the world. Through the church, the whole world will be blessed if she is faithful to her calling to worship, serve, and proclaim the love of God through Jesus Christ.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. Do you pray to the Holy Spirit often? Why or why not?
2. How does the Holy Spirit teach and remind us of the things that Jesus has taught us?
3. How does the Holy Spirit help you live a Christian life?
4. What do you think the mission of the church is?
5. Where do you see the church being a light in the darkness?
6. In what way do you see yourself being a sign and agent of blessing in the world?