

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth F. Keeler  
The First Sunday after the Epiphany (C)  
Sunday, January 13, 2019

*Isaiah 43:1-7 | Psalm 29*  
*Acts 8:14-17 | Luke 3:15-17, 21-22*

Today, the first Sunday after the Epiphany, we always celebrate the Baptism of the Lord. The Gospel readings every year tell the story of Jesus being baptized by John in the river Jordan and emerging to begin his three-year-long ministry. Churches often have baptisms on this Sunday and we baptized two precious baby girls at the nine o'clock service. It's easy to understand why the default sermon for this day would be all about baptism, but that's not what was in my heart. God nudged, and I grudgingly followed another thread, and so today I'm going to talk with you about the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit – not a topic that's often tackled in pulpits or Christian Education classes.

There's a common perception that the Western Church, our church, quite simply short-changes the Holy Spirit, and over the centuries we've put more effort into developing our Christology (the study of Christ) and our Ecclesiology (the study of the Church) to the detriment of our understanding of the Holy Spirit. Pneumatology, the study of the Holy Spirit, is derived from the Greek word *Pneuma* which means spirit or breath.

And I wonder if this is true for you, because I know it is for me. I'm much more comfortable thinking about God the Father and Jesus the Son than I am the Holy Spirit. But let's refer back to our Gospel reading from Luke today and notice that the Holy Spirit is mentioned more times than God, and that even while Jesus is a central character, it is the Holy Spirit doing the work, the heavy lift. John the Baptist announces plainly that Jesus will accomplish his work through the Holy Spirit. And even in our Baptism, yours and mine, and the ones this morning, we are sealed, or put another way, locked in by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit, while perhaps not as explored, or even as appreciated, the Holy Spirit is deeply imbedded in our worship, hymns, liturgy, our most basic theology and understanding of God – God's very identity. The Holy Spirit, is of course, the third and equal part of the triune God. Simply put, the Holy Spirit is a huge part of how God works – in the world, in creation, in history, in Jesus, and, yes, in us.

But where in the world might we even begin an exploration of the Holy Spirit? Well, the beginning is always a very good place to start. We find the Holy Spirit at work in Genesis where the uncreated world is depicted as a dark chaotic place but above that chaos is God's Spirit, hovering and ready to bring about life and order and beauty. Genesis 1, the very first words of Holy Scripture: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light. \*

Just a chapter later in Genesis 2, humankind enters the story and we hear how "the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." And breath is perhaps the most basic, intuitive way for us to think about the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew word for breath is *ruakh*. In seminary we were taught to pronounce *ruakh* as if we were clearing

our throats at the end of the word. It's a funny word that actually means more than just breath. It can also mean wind. In Holy Scripture *ruakh* also points to God's personal presence. Breath, wind, God's personal presence – what all these descriptions have in common is that they all point towards holy energy. God's holy energy, or effort, or God's very breath moving over the face of the world, giving life to creation, breathing life and soul into humanity. \*

As we continue on through the Bible we see God's holy energy, *ruakh*, working in individuals and then in a group of people – the Prophets, like Isaiah – who are empowered to bring messages from God to the people and to try and see and explain what is happening from God's point of view. The Prophets wisely identified a problem. While God's Spirit created a good and perfect world, humans had unleashed their own kind of chaos into it by turning away from God, and from one another. \*

In a way, mankind had returned the earth back towards the disordered state that it was in when the Spirit of God first hovered over it. To address this problem, the Prophets said that the Spirit of God would come again, just like it had in the beginning, this time to transform the human heart, to empower and teach people to love God and love one another. It is through the life of Jesus, of course, that we see this perfectly manifested. \*

And so now we've come full circle back to our Gospel reading that tells about Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan. Where we hear that God's Spirit comes down upon him in the form of a dove empowering Jesus to begin his mission of healing the human condition and starting a new creation. The Gospel stories are the account of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, fixing the chaos and disorder that mankind creates, by healing, teaching, forgiving, and loving.

Of course, the religious leaders of the time found Jesus' work threatening and so he was killed. Still, God's Spirit persists. Remember, after his death, when Jesus appeared to his closest followers he breathed into them the Holy Spirit, empowering them to spread God's love throughout the world. Soon after that, the Holy Spirit came over a whole host of followers and that's why we remember and celebrate Pentecost.

Today, the Holy Spirit continues to hover over our chaotic world, moving with God's breath, God's powerful presence. And if you remember nothing else from today's sermon, remember this – there's nothing we can do to stop it any more than we can stop the wind. But we can be attuned to the Holy Spirit, responding and participating to God's powerful energy in our lives. I began this sermon by offering that God had nudged me away from preaching about Baptism, but let's finally give credit where credit's due – it was the Holy Spirit nudging, cajoling, breathing, opening doors in me, just as the Holy Spirit does in all of us, in each of you. Amen.

\* Informed by The Bible Project's video: "The Holy Spirit"