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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
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Advent 3

Sisters and brothers in Christ, let us pray...May the words of my mouth and meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, for you are our strength and you are most certainly our redeemer. AMEN.

So, sisters and brothers in Christ, something is afoot here.

Something is going on here.

I know you are aware of it. I know you are a part of it. We are all a part of it.

Something is happening.

We can see it. We can hear it.

It is all around us.

It is noticeable in the air. Voices are singing. Bells are ringing.

People are offering each other well-wishes, saying things like, "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

Yes, something is going on. There is something in the air.

And not only it is noticeable to our ears. We can see it, too.

People have decorated their homes inside and out.

People have put up garlands, and ribbon, and lights, and knickknacks, and all sorts of stuff.

And people have set up trees in their homes. And when we stop to think about it, how weird is that?

Furthermore, people have hung stockings, yes, foot apparel, on the mantel of their fireplaces.

And in this most peculiar of seasons, there are people at parties and get-togethers trying to position themselves just so under sprigs of mistletoe, so that they can kiss.

Something is going on here.

Indeed, something is happening.

And, I have said it before, and I will say it again, if aliens from another planet were to come down to the planet earth to observe all that we human beings are doing, they would no doubt wonder “WHAT are they up to?”

PAUSE

Yes, when we stop to think about it, what is it that makes us do all these strange things?

Is it because everyone else is doing it? Is it because there is something infectious in the air?

Is it because of the holiday programming on television tells us we should do this—decorate your homes, put up a Christmas tree, sing some carols?

Maybe.

Is it all the advertising prompting us?

Or is it just that time of year? The trees have dropped their leaves, the weather has turned cold—it must be time to do those strange things we do each year.

PAUSE

So, again, how is it we know to do these things? What is it that motivates us, what is it that inspires us?

Now, to be sure, we don't do these things any other time of the year—only in late fall around December.

We don't see people going door to door to sing carols in May or June.

Which would make more sense—the weather would be a lot nicer.

We don't see people with lights on their homes and holiday decorations on their lawn in, say, the month of April, except for those who STILL haven't gotten around to putting their Christmas decorations away from December.

No, it only seems to happen at this time of year.

Something peculiar is happening now.

Something is going on in the present.

PAUSE

And it is kind of like what we see going on in our gospel reading today.

There in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist is testifying to the light.

John the Baptist is going around eating his locusts and wild honey, the breakfast of champions...

John the Baptist is going around wearing his camel hair garment, with a leather belt tied around his waist...

John the Baptist is going around proclaiming, "One is coming after me. One who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

And we wonder, like we do about this holiday season...

"How did John know to do this?"

"What is it that motivated him? What is it that inspired him?"

Indeed, if John the Baptist was familiar with our customs, he, too, probably would have put up a tree with some lights and sang some carols out there in the wilderness by the river Jordan.

Short of doing that, he just goes about proclaiming the one who is to come.

But again, something is going on here.

Something is happening.

Like in our contemporary world, something was going on with John the Baptist to make him behave the way he did.

PAUSE

And so, this is one of those times when we would like to pull back the mysterious veil that covers reality and see what is going on.

This is one of those times when we would like to look inside ourselves and discover what it is that makes us, and made John the Baptist, do all these things.

PAUSE

But, Friends, if we could in fact uncover the mystery...

If we could in fact look inside ourselves, into our hearts and minds...

We would see none other than the Spirit of God hard at work.

For this is the Spirit's doing. This is the Spirit's work.

No, it is not the programming on television—for after all someone has to produce that programming, and schedule that programming, so as to be seen, and what inspired those persons?

No, it is not the programming itself.

Nor is it the advertising, for to be sure, just because we see something—the ads, the holiday promotions— just because we see something does not make us do the things we do.

And it is not the weather, for even the weather does not go along on its own power, but by the will of God.

No, none of these things in and of themselves is the impetus for what we see going on in human society right now.

No, make no mistake about it, it is the Spirit of God, God's Holy Spirit, that prompts us, and motivates, and moves us to do all the things we do in this season.

It is the Spirit of God that INSPIRES us.

AHHH, and that is the word, THIS WORD which specifically speaks to our prompting and motivation—we are “inspired.”

For that word “inspired” shares the same Latin root with the word “spirit”: *spirare*, which literally means to breathe or to blow upon.

I love that, don't you?

In short, in this season our world has breathed in something wondrous, and our world is transformed.

Or, we could say God has blown God's breath upon the world and our world is transformed.

And that which we have breathed in, or that which has been blown upon us is none other than the Holy Spirit, and that has made all the difference. We are inspired, we are Spirit-infused.

PAUSE

It is hard to wrap our minds around this, because of course we can't see the Spirit.

But the Spirit is stirring, is moving, all around us, all around the world right now.

And we only know it is happening because of the effects of the Spirit.

It is like that line from Wendell Berry's poem entitled *Elegy*.

In that poem, Berry writes this beautiful image, "The shape of the wind is a tree, bending spilling its birds."

We can't see the wind, only its effect, its blowing, its breathing upon something else.

In like manner, we can't see the Spirit, but only its effect, its blowing, its breathing on something else.

That something else is humanity.

And, I find it interesting that as one global human family, we are caught up in the expectation of the coming child of Bethlehem.

We are very much caught up in God the Son right now, right?

It is all about Jesus. The birth of Jesus. The second person of the Trinity.

But the truth is, it is God the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity that is doing all the work, so as to inspire our world.

Without the Spirit inspiring our world right now, there would indeed be no decorating, no singing, no spreading of holiday cheer.

PAUSE

And some of us might wonder, why doesn't the Spirit inspire us with the same passion for Christmas throughout the entire year?

Why does the good will and joy of Christmas come and then just as quickly go away?

Is there something not working right? Is there something broken with the Spirit or broken in us?

I don't think so, but I do think the world forgets the power of the Spirit that is still at work even beyond Christmas and the holidays.

We have enough trouble seeing the Spirit in Christmas, so bogged down do we get with all the things we feel need to be accomplished at this time of year...

So bogged down do we get that even now many don't see the Spirit or recognize why it is we do what we do.

So bogged down do we get that we are not mindful, or we are indifferent, or are cynical even, such that then we don't see the Spirit at work around us and in us.

That, my Friends, is why then the words of Isaiah in our first lesson are so powerful.

What does the prophet Isaiah say? "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me."

How many of us have the courage and the daring to announce that to our friends and family?

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me."

And this is not some Pentecostal, charismatic kind of thing, where the Spirit is going to throw Isaiah to the ground and Isaiah is going to start speaking in tongues.

The Spirit could. But I don't think this is what Isaiah is saying.

Isaiah just recognizes the power of the Spirit that is at work in the world around him and through him.

Jesus proclaims these same words about himself in Luke's Gospel, Chapter 4, verse 18.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.

Indeed, the Spirit of the Lord is upon all of us, but so often we don't recognize it for what it is, and so we fail then to allow the Spirit to inspire us each and every day.

And so the goodwill and joy of the holidays soon dissipate until another year rolls around.

And so, perhaps the best Christmas message we can take to heart...

Perhaps the best Christmas message we can cling to is not that Jesus has been born...

Jesus was born 2,000 years ago. We know that. We get that.

No, but the best Christmas message we can embrace, and carry with us, each and every day of the year is...

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and upon you, and upon each and every one of us in the world.

It is true. We have seen it with our eyes. We have heard it with our ears. It is evident all around us right now.

All this, that which we do during the holidays doesn't happen otherwise, unless the Spirit of the Lord is upon us.

Yes, the effects of the invisible Spirit are very much on display.

We just need to understand that it is the Spirit who is the cause for why we do what we do.

And understanding that, we need to proclaim as well, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, and you, and is upon us all."

And then, and then maybe, just maybe we will see that the Spirit is upon us ALWAYS throughout the whole year.

And we then can allow the effects of the Spirit to cause us each and every day to bring good news to the oppressed...

...to bind up the brokenhearted...to proclaim liberty to the captives...

...and release to the prisoners...to comfort all who mourn...

And if we do that, well, just maybe the Christmas celebration will indeed echo the whole year round. Amen.