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Our Saviour/St. Stephen
May 19, 2024
Pentecost

Sisters and brother 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.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, today the Church celebrates the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And we heard in our first reading from the book of Acts about the coming of the Holy Spirit upon those early Christians.

The apostles were all gathered in one place.

And then there was the sound like the rush of violent wind.

And then divided tongues, as of fire, appeared and rested on each of the apostles.

And they were filled with the Holy Spirit.

PAUSE

Yes, today is the day that the Church celebrates the gift of Holy Spirit.

And yet, we have to admit the Holy Spirit is something of a conundrum.

The Holy Spirit is a bit puzzling.

I mean, at least with God the FATHER and the God the SON, we can relate.

We know what a parental figure is, and what a sibling is.

We get that.

But spirits and ghosts are foreign to us, except what we see in horror movies and on television.

Furthermore, we know what God the FATHER does—he is the Creator, the one who brought all things into being.

And we know what God the SON does—he is the Savior, the one who died on the cross and rose again, that we may be saved from our sins and have eternal life.

We get that. But the Spirit?

Who the Spirit is and what the Spirit does, well that is a bit fuzzy.

Why? Well, I think, the fuzziness has to do in large part because we can't see it.

We can't see the Holy Spirit, which is why the Holy Spirit may be associated with the wind in our reading with Acts.

We can't see the wind either.

And yet...and YET we know the wind is a real thing.

We know there is such a thing called the wind, because we can see the EFFECTS of the wind.

The wind blows so as to bend tall grasses making waves in a field.

The wind blows so as to sweep across the face of a lake causing ripples on its surface.

Yes, the wind blows and we see its effects, and we know then that the wind is real.

Indeed, one of my most favorite images of the wind comes from poet Wendell Berry.

It is a quote I have shared with you before; I included it in last year's Pentecost sermon in fact.

But it is such a great image, I couldn't help but quote it again.

Wendell Berry wrote, "The shape of the wind is a tree bending spilling its birds."

"The shape of the wind is a tree bending spilling its birds."

Isn't that lovely?

Again, we can't see the wind, only its effects.

And so, “The shape of the wind...is a tree bending spilling its birds.”

PAUSE

And so when we think about the Holy Spirit, it is a similar thing as that of the wind.

We can't see the Holy Spirit, but we can see its effects.

And in seeing its effects, we know that the Holy Spirit is real.

We know, by the effects of the Holy Spirit, that it is alive and active in the world around us.

PAUSE

But how does the Holy Spirit stir and move around us, such that the Holy Spirit causes things to happen?

Where do we see the effects of the Holy Spirit?

Well, one of the places where we see the effects of the Holy Spirit is right here.

The reason we are even here this morning, is because of the Holy Spirit.

For something stirred us awake. You could argue it was your alarm clock. But something stirred you to set your alarm clock.

Yes, something motivated us to get up, to get showered, and to get us into our cars to come here.

Something called to us and gathered us.

And that something is the Holy Spirit.

How else does “Church” happen if not for the power of the Holy Spirit?

How else would we define “Church” but as an act, an effect of the Holy Spirit?

Yes, the Holy Spirit is alive and active.

And it has blown us together to be here this morning.

PAUSE

Now, Martin Luther defined the four-fold work of the Holy Spirit as this.

The Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies.

That is what the Spirit does specifically.

It calls us. The Holy Spirit speaks to each of our individual spirits, and we are moved to get ready for church.

The Spirit then gathers us, such that we have come here to be in this place.

The Spirit enlightens us, such that we hear God's word, we experience God's grace, and we are enlightened.

And the Spirit sanctifies us, such that we are made holy.

We are made holy. We are set apart for a particular purpose.

That is what it means to be holy after all—to be set apart for a particular purpose.

And so most anything can be “holy.”

We might have a special outfit that we only wear on certain occasions.

That outfit could be classified as “holy,” set apart for a particular purpose.

Or, we might have a special meal that we serve only on a particular holiday.

That meal could be classified as “holy,” set apart for a particular purpose.

It is unfortunate that we tend to limit the word “holy” so that we only use the word with respect to “religious things.”

Holy water in baptism. Holy bread and wine in communion.

But again, “holy” refers to anything set apart for a special purpose.

Pentecost, though, is focused on the holy people of God.

We are made holy because at the time of Pentecost we remember that the Holy Spirit formed the Church.

So, Pentecost is not just the celebration of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost is also the time when we celebrate the gift of the Church.

Because of all the effects of the Holy Spirit, the Church is formed.

So, this is the work of the Holy Spirit—it calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies us—to be the people of God.

PAUSE

But there are other ways in which we could speak of the effects of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that life reemerges after winter—flowers bloom, trees push forth leaves, and animals awake from hibernation.

How does that happen, if not for the Holy Spirit calling forth the renewal of life?

Yes, God the Father creates and the Son of God redeems creation, but it is the Holy Spirit that calls forth creation to new life again and again.

PAUSE

And how is it that caterpillars know when and how to form chrysalises, so as to become butterflies?

And how is it that bees know how to build beehives using that same hexagonal pattern over and over, and subsequently store delicious honey in the comb?

And how is it that gases in the great expanse of outer space know how to condense and condense some more to the point that those gases ignite to form stars?

Scientists can talk about the processes by which all these things in creation happen.

Scientists can talk about things like photosynthesis, gravity, DNA replication, and all those other terms.

But, in truth science JUST explains the processes.

Science does not explain the “why” creation does these things in the first place.

Science does not explain the “inherent knowledge of creation” to do all the things that it does.

That is the mystery.

And this is what we would then classify as the effects of the Holy Spirit.

So as opposed to finding the Holy Spirit a bit of conundrum.

As opposed to struggling to understand who the Holy Spirit is and what the Holy Spirit does because it is not visible.

As opposed to throwing our hands up in the air in exasperation...

I remind us again this day, this Pentecost, to look for the effects of the Holy Spirit in the world around us.

Look for the mystery in the world—the things that are unexplainable, those things beyond the scientific processes.

Look for the “why,” and look for the “how does creation know how to do that”?

And when we come up short with an explanation, we can be pretty sure it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

PAUSE

Let me, then leave us with a few final thoughts about the power of the Holy Spirit at work in us human beings, that sets us apart from perhaps all God’s other creatures.

Human beings, for instance, have the capacity to stop and appreciate beauty.

Why a gorgeous sunset can captivate us, can astound us to speechlessness...

Why a moving song can reduce us to tears...

That is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Human beings also have a great capacity for justice and mercy.

Why a wrong that is done to another can upset us so...

Why a feel-good story, a story where one overcomes great hardship, gives us great hope...

That is the power of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, we human beings are such a mystery, that we appreciate beauty, and can recognize injustice and seek mercy, and have the power to forgive and to hope...

These things, too, are a result of the Holy Spirit.

How else can it be explained?

There are no scientific processes that explain the many things human beings do.

PAUSE

So, thanks be to God for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And thanks be to God for the gift of the Church—we who have been called, gathered, enlightened, and sanctified, so that we can PROCLAIM to the world the goodness of God who has given the world this Holy Spirit, to stir, and move, and cause all the great effects around us.

Thanks be to God. Amen.