

Luke 3:15-22

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

January 9, 2022

Making Room for the Spirit

Have y'all ever heard the saying, "Just be sure to leave room for the Holy Spirit?" This was a fairly regular refrain in my youth group growing up. The idea behind it being when two youths were slow dancing or sitting next to one another on a couch, that it was important that they be far enough apart that the Holy Spirit could fit between them.

Now I'll say that there is certainly some harmful purity culture within this, but it was said with such silliness by my youth leaders, that we all just thought it was kind of funny. And I think it's because for some reason, it felt absurd to imagine the Holy Spirit as an embodied being, as something we needed to or even could make room for.

In fact, being the smart alecks that we were, we would often counter by saying that the Spirit is like air and air moves freely no matter how close we are. Surely, it's not possible to not leave room for the Holy Spirit. Right?

While sitting with this story about baptism this week, the thing that stood out to me the most was that as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, it did so **in bodily form**.

There are many accounts throughout the Scriptures of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and in all of the others, the Spirit is described in a very ephemeral way. Like wind or air. Like tongues of fire. Like a dove, but not in an embodied kind of way, just like in a flighty, fluttering bird kind of way.

In this way, the Spirit is something you can feel, but not touch.

However here, in Jesus' baptism, at the start of his public ministry, we encounter the Spirit behaving completely out of character.

I can only imagine how significant this was for the people who were gathered with Jesus that day. For they were suffering in mind, body, and soul, as individuals and as collective. They gathered there those days even though King Herod was plotting against them because he did not like the message that John the Baptist was preaching.

They journeyed to the wilderness, trusting that even though Rome occupied their lands, the wilderness would always be a place where they could encounter their God.

These were not free people, they were a people living under the tyranny of empire. They were poor. They were hungry. They were desperate for change, for restoration for their families and their towns and their temple. They were longing in their entire beings for the Messiah to be among them. To feel that their God is with them.

And the gift they received in this moment of communal prayer and baptism was that they encountered the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in profoundly tangible ways.

The Spirit moved that day like a dove, as is often described, but that day it also had form. Body. That day, the Spirit was present in a way that was physical, tangible, touchable. It took up space.

And it rested upon Jesus, the Christ, the incarnation. His name is Immanuel, God with us, embodied as one of us.

And if this wasn't enough, then came down a voice from Heaven, loudly proclaiming and confirming everything the people were seeing and touching and experiencing with all of these different senses.

The people gathered that day needed to hear the promises of God. They needed to see the miracles of God. They needed to touch and feel and know that God with them.

I'm so moved by this image of Jesus, with the people, being baptized right alongside them. The Spirit actually taking up space in this realm, being something that could be felt and also touched. I am moved by the Creator speaking forth the heavens: You are my beloved.

I am moved because it's all so incredibly intimate and sensual and completely and utterly whole.

And this was just the beginning. For this moment set the tone for Jesus' entire earthly ministry: He lived among the people. He walked with them. Ate with them. Laid his hands upon them. Breathed on them.

He offered healing in mind and body. For individuals and entire communities. He offers and he invites the entire world to experience an intimate and sensual and completely whole connection to self, to neighbor, and to God.

And my friends, what more do any of us long for than this? Than to see and hear and know and feel with as many senses as possible that God is with us? That's God's promises are being made real...that healing and joy and salvation are within our actual, physical reach?

What more do any of us desire or need?

The irony is not lost on me that as I am speaking about the gift and the comfort of tangible presence, while I myself am in isolation, as are many of y'all. Has this not been our constant struggle throughout this pandemic?

We know that physical presence and touch and just feeling the vibe in a room, these things are important to our physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and communal health.

And yet, physical presence continues to pose a threat to that same health.

I know that many of us sincerely thought and believed that we would not still be in this pandemic, but here we are. And as exhausting and frustrating as that is, there's an incredible grace in the fact that albeit a bit differently, we are still able to be present with, to be present to one another.

There is an incredible gift of grace that I am still proclaiming the word of God. That we are still singing praises to God. That we are still collectively praying for one another and the world. Sharing resources with one another. Taking care of one another. Showing up for one another and any and every way possible.

We are still together, some in body and others through magical internet waves, but together nonetheless. Through the grace and the love of God, through the invitation to be Christ's living body, through the promise of the Holy Spirit, we are still intimately, with as many senses as are possible, completely and utterly whole. Completely and utterly together.

And this truth shines through whenever we baptize one in our midst. We proclaim:

*There is one body and one Spirit,
one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and [Creator] of all,
who is above all and through all and in all.*

We proclaim that in baptism that we are one. That we belong to God. That God is with us, God is for us, God is within us.

Here's what I think, my friends: we smart aleck kids were onto something. The Holy Spirit can actually squeeze into the smallest of gaps. And thus making room for the Spirit is perhaps less complicated than it may seem. Because the Spirit is already present and accounted for. Our job is to open our senses to feel and know it.

For the Holy Spirit can be felt in the goosebumps we get a song lifts our soul.

The Spirit can be tasted in a homecooked meal or groceries dropped off by a friend.

The Spirit can be heard live from the sanctuary and pre-recorded through zoom.

For the Spirit of God knows no borders, no boundaries, no infections or isolations.

The Spirit of God shows up in locked places, moves among broken peoples, exerts power in spite of tyrannical rulers.

The Spirit of God can truly squeeze into the smallest, the loneliest, and the scariest of places. Because the Spirit of God is already in those places.

Truly, the Spirit is among us, bringing us comfort and hope in our loneliness and in our longing for salvation.

The Spirit is within us, mending our minds, bodies, and souls and gently affirming our belovedness.

The Spirit is upon us, my friends, setting the tone for intimate, sensual, completely and utterly whole and embodied ministry that God calls us to do in the world.

The Spirit of God is present, my friends, wherever and whenever we are. Thanks be to God!

In the name of our Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.