

CATCHING THE HOLY SPIRIT IN ACTION

5/30/21 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Trinity (B): ~~Isaiah 6:1-8~~; Psalm 29 *or* Canticle 13 (or Canticle 2); Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

These past several months, while we've been worshipping outside, I've had a heightened sense of the wind—how easily it can interfere with life, or at the very least...mess with our sound system! Last Sunday's readings, describing the violent wind of Pentecost, reminded me of some of the storms I experienced growing up in Northeastern Montana, where the wind would literally howl, and the sides of our double-wide mobile home would buckle in and out with the force of the gales.

I also remember trying to explain wind—as a teenager to a much younger cousin. Heidi and her mother had come to watch my track meet, and the spring breeze was blowing her fine, little baby hair into her face. She'd push her hair back, and then turn to see who was behind her. Heidi was determined to figure out who was messing with her hair! But she was only about two and a half years old, so even though we kept explaining, "It's just the wind," she continued trying to catch this person "the wind" in action.

That's basically what the Holy Spirit is like! We can see the results of where the Holy Spirit has been at work in our lives, but we can't actually turn and find the Holy Spirit standing there behind us; we can't catch her in action. And the Holy Spirit is just one aspect of our triune God.

Today, is Trinity Sunday, so we explore this notion of not three separate gods: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but the triune nature of God: Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer; or as used in the New Zealand Prayer Book: Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, Life-giver. And, yet, speaking of God's triune nature is just as elusive as John's Gospel describes: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes."

Poor Nicodemus is trying to make sense of what Jesus is saying, but, rather than clarifying, Jesus seems to issue a riddle. Given a little more context, one has to wonder if Jesus isn't giving his new friend a little ribbing for the hard time Nicodemus and his Pharisee buddies have caused Jesus. Even though Nicodemus has indicated he's coming to understand that Jesus is from God and not from Moses, he is still suspect enough—or fearful enough of his association with Jesus—that he comes by night.

On the other hand, other information indicates Nicodemus has also argued on Jesus' behalf. So, even though Jesus teases Nicodemus that he couldn't possibly understand heavenly things, since he seems confused about earthly things, Jesus continues his teaching with Nicodemus. Explaining what he means by birth of water and spirit, he draws Nicodemus further into an experience of the triune God.

Like my little cousin, you can almost picture Nicodemus looking around behind him—or in his case, above him—as he tries to comprehend a birth from above. He can feel the Holy Spirit at work in himself, drawing him closer to God, but he can't quite identify from where this loving force originates. Jesus, however, gently moves Nicodemus forward; he speaks of a birth not of flesh, but of God.

And then Jesus seals the deal with those famous words so many of us have memorized: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

That same message is echoed by the Apostle Paul in our reading from Romans. Instead of birth from above, however, Paul describes the process as our “adoption into God’s family,” and explores the difference between living as part of the flesh and being a part of the Spirit. He says, “But if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

While his Platonist education comes through in his use of “Spirit vs. flesh,” it’s important to remember that Paul is not saying the body is bad. Rather, the distinction he makes points to the fact that we—in our humanness—cannot achieve eternal life, or adoption into God’s family, on our own. This divine process happens only through the working of the Holy Spirit.

Paul goes on to state that we are no longer subject to only the law, but that we are actually joint heirs with Christ. Of course, that wonderful news comes with a huge amount of responsibility. Paul explains being a joint heir means we not only share in Christ’s glory, we also share in Christ’s suffering.

Again, this isn’t about suffering for the sake of suffering, but understanding that God’s invitation is into relationship—relationship with the triune nature of God and relationship with the rest of humanity. When you suffer, I suffer in solidarity with you; when we feel glorious and joyful, Christ—in solidarity—celebrates with us.

That’s why the Trinity of God is often referred to as a dance—one nature of God flowing into the other, flowing into us, and so on. I like the way the Trinity is described in the affirmation of faith from the Iona community: God above us, God beside us, God within us.

Even if we can’t catch the Holy Spirit in action, we are assured, in John’s Gospel, that God’s intention, in drawing us closer in this dance of love—just as Jesus did with Nicodemus—is not to judge us, but to redeem humanity. “Indeed,” John writes, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”

-AMEN & ALLELUIA!

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, you have given to us your servants grace, by the confession of a true faith, to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity, and in the power of your divine Majesty to worship the Unity: Keep us steadfast in this faith and worship, and bring us at last to see you in your one and eternal glory, O Father; who with the Son and the Holy Spirit live and reign, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

Canticle 13

Glory to you, Lord God of our fathers; *
you are worthy of praise; glory to you.

Glory to you for the radiance of your holy Name; *
we will praise you and highly exalt you for ever.

Glory to you in the splendor of your temple; *
on the throne of your majesty, glory to you.

Glory to you, seated between the Cherubim; *
we will praise you and highly exalt you for ever.

Glory to you, beholding the depths; *
in the high vault of heaven, glory to you.

Glory to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; *
we will praise you and highly exalt you for ever.

Romans 8:12-17

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

John 3:1-17

There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.