

“I Believe in the Holy Spirit”

Psalm 51:10-11; John 14:15-17; 25-27

Market Square Presbyterian Church

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Rev. Dr. Bruce Humphrey, Bridge Pastor

I want to paint four images for us this morning. Using our imagination, let the first image be a picture of a wind. It might be a fierce wind pushing trees and bushes with gusts up to 40 or 50 miles an hour. It might be a gentle breeze barely causing the wind chimes to tone softly. The picture in your mind is wind.

The second picture I want you to develop with your imagination is a picture of fire. It could be flickering candle flame. It might be a campfire with friends sitting around it. It might be large blaze endangering forest or structures. Do you have an image of fire in your mind?

Next, I want you to picture a dove. It might be a dove hovering a married couple at their wedding. It might be a dove carrying an olive branch. It might a dove descending over Jesus at his baptism. Picture a white dove.

Now the fourth image I want to create in our imaginations is one of a romantic couple holding hands and walking together. It might be a walk on a beach or in a field. Nobody else is in the scene, just good even romantic friends walking side by side and holding hands. Can you picture this scene in your mind?

Here is my question today. Which of these images most closely matches your understanding of the Holy Spirit? There is no wrong answer. Each of these can be defended with scripture.

Genesis chapter 1 describes the Holy Spirit as a wind hovering over the waters of chaos. The story of Pentecost and the arrival of the Holy Spirit giving birth to the Christian Church describes a mighty wind in Acts 2. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruah* meaning wind, breath. God's Spirit is like breath, wind.

Likewise, there is good reason to picture the Holy Spirit with images of flames and fire. The Holy Spirit led the Israelites during forty years in the wilderness by presenting as flame of fire over the tabernacle. The Holy Spirit arrives at Pentecost in the form of individual flames over the heads of the Apostles. God's Spirit can be pictured as flames of fire.

The image of Holy Spirit as dove is common in stained glass windows and Christian religious art. Often, we picture the moment of Jesus' baptism when the Spirit descends on him as a dove. The Presbyterian symbol has a dove over the Bible representing the Holy Spirit interpreting God's word into our hearts. Dove is a good biblical image.

Finally, Holy Spirit as a hand holding friend walking along side us. This may feel a little less biblical to most of us. Where do we find this image in scripture? I would suggest that John 14 is describing a relationship like that of good friends (even romantic partners) holding hands.

John 14

15 *'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

25 *'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. 26 But the Advocate,[i] the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. 27 Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

A little girl did a funeral for her bird "Tweety." She invited the neighborhood children to her backyard. There she placed the little match box casket next to a tiny grave. She began with a prayer, then a eulogy. "We all remember how Tweety was so cheerful, his fun chirping and singing. We will miss Tweety. Then she looked at the children and pronounced her benediction the way she had her the preacher do it. "In the name of the Father, and the Son." She kicked the casket into the grave as she finished, "and in the hole he goes."

This might be the toughest sermon for me to preach in the entire Apostles' Creed series. Not because it is difficult to explain the Holy Spirit. Rather, it is tough to take my love for the Holy Spirit and pare it down to one sermon. I have written a book on the Holy Spirit. I have led weekend seminars and retreats on the Holy Spirit. I have preached entire six part series of sermons on the Holy Spirit. So how do I give just one message on the Holy Spirit?

Here is probably the most important thing I need to say. The Holy Spirit, while pictured in various scriptures as fire, wind, or dove is finally more fully revealed in the New Testament as a person. The Holy Spirit is a person, not an "it" or impersonal force, "May the force be with you". The most common misinterpretation about the Holy Spirit is to think of Spirit as It, rather than a person.

Why is this important? Because we need to be aware that God's Spirit has personality. Holy Spirit has likes and dislikes. Holy Spirit can be offended and grieved.

When Jesus described the Holy Spirit as our Advocate, the word literally means "one who comes alongside." One of the ways we find this word in the original language is referring to a tugboat that comes alongside a ship and helps it dock.

Remember when that huge ship got away from the tugboat in the Baltimore harbor this last spring? The ship had lost its steering and began drifting out of control. By the time the tugboat tried to redirect it, the ship was too far gone and hit and destroyed the Francis Scott Key bridge over the harbor. The result was major economic impact as so many companies lost time and spent resources with backed up shipping issues.

The New Testament invites us to walk alongside the Holy Spirit. As close friends sharing our joys and sorrows, the Spirit wants to accompany, help, encourage and guide us. The Holy Spirit's personality is gentle and modest, not showing off, but wanting to whisper to our hearts.

Ephesians 4 reminds us that we can stop listening to the Holy Spirit. We can choose to go our own way. We can reject the Spirit's guidance and stop holding hands. Ephesians 4 calls this grieving the Holy Spirit.

Grieving is an important verb. We can't grieve an impersonal force. We can't grieve the wind or a flame of fire. When we blow out a candle it doesn't get hurt feelings. But the Holy Spirit is a person whose feelings can be hurt. The Spirit gives us suggestions, nudges us, warns us, encourages us. But the whole time we can choose to walk away from the Spirit.

King David, in his prayer of confession in Psalm 51, realizes how he has grieved the Holy Spirit. He prays that God not give up on him, but come back and hold hands again. "Do not take away your Holy Spirit."

The Holy Spirit can be grieved by our choices to neglect or even reject the inner voice. Likewise, the Spirit can be excited when we pay attention and follow the guidance. As we learn to tune into the Spirit's gentle encouragements, we get more guidance.

A few years ago, my wife and I were shopping on a Sunday afternoon at a local Giant grocery store. I had recently completed an Interim Ministry and was not yet sure what my calling was in retirement.

As we wandered past the butter and cheeses, another couple was coming toward us. The two wives made space to pass each other with their carts, when the man stopped me and asked if he could tell me something. He was a tall 6'3" Black man that looked like he was probably an athlete earlier in his life. It could have felt threatening, but he immediately put me at ease as he addressed me with deference and respect.

"Sir, may I tell you something?"

"Um, OK." I responded.

"Do you know what an apostle is?"

"You mean like in the Bible? The 12 apostles of Jesus?"

With excitement in his voice he said, "Yes!"

I felt like he was going to evangelize me or something. Kate and I made eye contact, not sure what was happening.

He continued. "I felt the Holy Spirit give me a prophecy for you. God is calling you to be an apostle." Then he described what he meant. "In my tradition, we believe an apostle is someone whose ministry goes beyond the local church. It is someone who is called to lead across several churches and help the pastors of several churches. Does that make any sense to you?"

I was stunned. "Yes," I responded. "I am thinking about using my experiences as a retired pastor to coach and help other pastors."

He reached out to give me a hug as he said, "I was right! The Holy Spirit, told me to tell you God is calling you to be an apostle."

Our two wives just stood there as we embraced and thanked each other for a meaningful moment of the Holy Spirit.

So, let me ask you a question. How is your relationship with the Holy Spirit? Are you walking together hand in hand? Are you listening? Or have you walked away from God's Spirit and maybe need to get reconnected?