

“No Holy Spirit?”

John wrote in today’s Gospel, ***“for as yet there was no Spirit, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”*** There are several problems with those words.

If we argue (as we do) that the Holy Spirit is an equal part of the Trinity, then there cannot be a time when ***“there was no Spirit.”*** If we contend (as we do) with St. Paul ***“no one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”*** [1 Corinthians 12:3], then there would be no access to faith if ***“there was no Spirit.”*** If we believe (as we do) with Martin Luther that ***“the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith”*** then where would we be if ***“there was no Spirit”?***

Raymond Brown writes: ***“Some manuscripts and versions seek to soften the impact of this, e.g. ‘The Spirit was not yet given’ or ‘not yet on them.’ Probably the scribes saw a theological difficulty, as if John were saying that the Third Person of the Trinity did not exist before Jesus was glorified in passion, death, and resurrection. But a gospel statement such as this is not concerned with the inner life of God; it is concerned with God’s relation to us. The Spirit was not a reality as far as [humans] were concerned until the glorified Jesus would communicate the Spirit to [them]. Then the Spirit would operate in a new creation in a way hitherto impossible.”*** [The Gospel According to John I-XII, Anchor Bible p. 324]

Clearly, the Bible attests to the presence of the Spirit long before John’s Gospel. Already in the opening verse of Genesis, we read that the Spirit was moving ***“over the face of the waters”*** (some translations insert “wind of God” here; the Hebrew word is *ruach*, which can be translated “wind, breath, or spirit”). In today’s First Lesson we hear how the Spirit was poured out on Moses and then on the elders of the nation, and then surprisingly ricocheted to two men who were not in the group. We read repeatedly through the Book of Judges how the spirit of the Lord moved

in first this judge and then that one (the word that is translated “judge” would be better translated as “rescuer”) and then the Spirit is said to have come upon David.

The word “spirit” occurs more than two hundred times in the Old Testament (although it may be used simply to suggest the inner thoughts of an individual). That is as it may be, and I do think that Dr. Brown has it right, but I cannot so easily do what he suggests others have done and add words to the text that I think should be there. I am left with the text as it has been handed down to us, and I find the words, “*there was no Spirit*” somewhat disturbing. So I want to imagine with you this morning what it might mean if it were true that “*there was no Spirit.*”

Luther’s insight begins with an interesting paradox. He writes in his Small Catechism: “*I believe that I cannot . . . believe . . .*” That’s ironic . . . and very humbling. Faith is not something I do — it is solely and completely a gift of the Holy Spirit.

We dare not underestimate that; but I fear we do. “*I CANNOT believe,*” is an amazing confession. We would prefer to quote the father who brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus and cried out “*I believe; help my unbelief!*” [Mark 9:24] — as if our problem was simply a weak or imperfect faith that just needs a little punching up. No! **I** cannot believe! So if there was no Spirit, I would be faithless.

As important as that is, it is more important that I understand the object of that faith. “*I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him . . .*” It is not enough to have faith; I must have faith that brings me into relationship with Jesus Christ — a relationship in which I know Him as “Lord” and He knows me as “Friend.” Isn’t that amazing?

He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords — I must know that; I must trust that (that is the essence of faith . . . not just to think something is true, but absolutely to embrace it in trust). But this sovereign Lord of all desires that I know Him as Friend. He is not removed and distant from

me. He does not desire to “lord it” over me. He wants to draw close to me, walk with me, stay with me. He invites me to take up residence in Him — John records Jesus saying “*Abide in me as I abide in you.*” [John 15:4] (the Greek word is μένω, (meno) which means to “continue, remain” and at its root means to take up residence).

Jesus obviously does not want a casual relationship with us. That is the very reason, He told us, that He sent the Holy Spirit. “*When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf.*” [John 15:26] “*[He] will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.*” [John 14:26]

The Spirit is the one who makes Jesus real for us. Let me delve into that sentence just a bit.

There are many things in our belief system that we regard as true; but for many of us those truths have yet to become real. We may intellectually accept that there is something there to which we agree, but we have not yet allowed that to become an integral part of our lives. The Spirit, whom Jesus calls, “*the Spirit of truth,*” is far more— this is the Spirit of what is real.

If “*there was no Spirit*” we would not know the truth about Jesus, but more than that, we would not experience the reality of Jesus in our lives. A reality that is as close as our breathing, as deep as our innermost heart, and as much a part of us as our heartbeat.

How does the Spirit do this? Once again, Luther helps us: “*the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith*”

Let’s begin with “*the true faith*” — what is “*the true faith*”? We go back to that distinction between “true” and “real.” We also must recognize that there are teachings that swirl around us that could very easily lead us astray into false notions of security.

An example comes from today's First Lesson: ***“ . . . a young man ran and told Moses, ‘Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.’ And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, ‘My lord Moses, stop them!’”*** The false notion held by Joshua is that the Holy Spirit should be very selective in His impact on God's people — only the elite should have any visible evidence of the Spirit's work.

Contrast that with today's Second Lesson: ***“All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.”*** We have to understand that “all of them” did not include simply the Twelve (newly reconstituted by the election of Matthias), it meant all those who had been following Jesus ever since the Galilean ministry. The Spirit did not come and say, *“Okay, Peter, you get zonked; sorry, Matthias, you haven't been one of the ‘in’ people long enough; you'll have to wait.”*

Go back then to Moses' reaction to the outpouring on Eldad and Medad: ***“Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!”*** Amen to that!

So now, how do we get the Eldad and Medad experience? *“Hold on, Pastor,”* you may want to respond, *“I'm not at all sure that I want to get into the prophesying business.”* What is “prophesying”? It is not fortune-telling; it is Word-of-God-sharing. Like it or not, want it or not, you are already in that “business.”

How so? *“the Holy Spirit has called [you] by the Gospel.”* It is the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God that has brought you into relationship with Christ. That did not happen so that you might get to lock that away in your private little vault of belief, but so that you may share it with others.

Look again at the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. They did not stand in shock and say to themselves, *“Wow! This is neat!”* and leave it at that. No, they quickly realized that this was a gift to be shared and it took them to the streets.

What was it that took them to the streets? Listen to those who heard them: ***“in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.”*** That is how the Spirit chooses to work — the gift of faith is bestowed to be shared. More than that, *“the Holy Spirit has . . . enlightened me with His gifts . . .”* The first and foremost gift is the Spirit Himself. The second and equally important gift is faith.

The Scriptures go on about any number of gifts: ***“To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues.”*** [1 Corinthians 12:8-10] ***“The gifts [Christ] gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers . . .”*** [Ephesians 4:11] ***“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.”*** [Romans 12:6-8]

Gifts are poured out on God’s people (that includes you); some gifts become established into offices of ministry; all gifts make the receiver a gift to others and to the entire mission and ministry of the church. You have gifts; you are a gift. Praise God! All of that would disappear if ***“there was no Spirit”***.

The good news is that there is a Spirit — a very lively, active, and powerful Spirit. Today we celebrate that Spirit on this day of the first outpouring on the Church. We dare not make this a commemoration of something that took place “way back when.” We must see this day as a day to celebrate that the Holy Spirit is still being poured out on the Church and on St. Thomas congregation.

Today we hear Jesus proclaim: ***“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out***

of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water.” This very reminiscent of what He said to the Samaritan woman at the well: “. . . *those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.*” It takes us to our first encounter with the Holy Spirit — in the waters of our baptisms. There faith was bestowed; here faith is nurtured; here gifts are to be tried on and tried out; here ongoing encounters with the Spirit are to be expected and desired.

Until we become the dispensers of living water that shower down on others who are then drawn into the Spirit's embrace. To hasten that day, on this day we call out to the Holy Spirit: *“More, please! More!”*

Amen.