

Sermon for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Killeen, Texas

January 27, 2019

As it was for Jesus, so it is for us. When the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, we see nothing but freedom and deliverance from all the ways that life on earth has boxed us in.

How could it be otherwise? There is a vast difference between seeing what the Spirit sees and seeing what the eye sees on earth.

Compared to the realm of heaven, the richest of us is poor. Compared to eternity, we are all imprisoned, all blind, oppressed and in need of God's favor. However highly we might think of ourselves, we are nothing in comparison to the being of light that we will be in the full presence of God.

Again, how could it be otherwise? Do you really want to be the person you are today for all of eternity? Surely you don't want to drag along your dissatisfactions, phobias, prejudices, delusions, fatalisms and resentments forever. Stretched out to infinity, they would destroy you. That would be hell, not heaven.

When the Spirit of the Lord is upon us, we catch a glimpse of that being of light we will be in eternity with God, even if for just a flash. This is the same Spirit of God that came upon Jesus in the midst of worship at his home town in Nazareth and he leaped to his feet, seized the scroll, read about the way the Spirit would bring liberation from poverty, blindness, prisons, an end of oppression for everybody, and then claimed this Spirit for himself.

The harsher and more difficult our times may be, the more vital it is that we remember the Spirit. We've been trained to treat our present realities as a balance of good and bad things. When the balance goes toward the negative, we feel unhappy and discouraged. When the balance tilts toward the positive, we're a bit happier and feel some better, yet we still embrace a dark foreboding that evil will roll around again soon.

The Spirit breaks entirely free of this dismal back and forth, only-so-happy world.

The Spirit is about a way of life not of this earth. I'm reminded of the famous first words of a traditional American hymn: "My life goes on in endless song above earth's lamentation." The author of these words has spent a lot of time alive in the Spirit and understands the real nature of the human soul. It's true that we live in a world full of reasons for lamentation. Pain and loss are very real, of compelling importance to us all, but *they are not eternal*.

Soaring above lamentation is an unbound eternity in each of us that is music, not speech; flying, not walking; living, not dying. The Spirit is music, song, poetry in comparison to the prose of a market analysis or statistical study of social trends or the clinical notes of a psychotherapist or even the plodding prose of a preacher. The Christian truth that we believe with all our hearts is that the music and poetry of the Spirit of God is everything in comparison to lamentation's prose.

I don't care whether you can carry a tune or if your eyes glaze over with incomprehension when you try to read a poem. You don't have to be an artist to appreciate the Spirit. You only have to be alive.

Everybody in this room knows what I'm talking about. You have all experienced the Spirit. Some of you know it and relish your time in the Spirit. Others have experienced the Spirit but thought you just got lucky once and never will again. Others have experienced the Spirit but rationalized it away. Other may think they have but aren't sure and wonder. A lot of us just missed it entirely without even noticing the moment of grace as we moved on. No matter. The Spirit of God has come to you and somewhere down inside you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Which of us hasn't had the experience of struggling for a long time with a particularly knotty problem in our relationships or business or even school, trying this move or that, pushing forward by main force of will, fatalistic about the outcome, only to have a profound and elegant solution appear in a flash, a solution so true and clear that it should have been obvious all along, yet it wasn't there until the Spirit moved. Then later, even though you slip back into the grind and the magic is gone, somewhere deep down inside you know that the song goes on above new lamentations and you pray with longing for its return.

Which of us hasn't had the experience of grieving long over loss or failure, the death of one we love, a failure in the workplace, a humiliation in the face of peers, only to discover, when things seem intolerable, that there is a movement of the Spirit in grace that dissolves old needs and expectations and fills us with a warm, deep strength for moving forward again in life. We do not produce grace like that with our own emotions or force of will, but, rather, we find it coming unexpected and unlooked for from outside the reach of our minds. It is the song above earth's lamentations that goes on even as things on this earth come to an end.

Which of us hasn't at some time in life, experienced shame, however great or small, that we simply aren't as smart or good or wise or honest or faithful as we wish we were, wondered how we will go on living with ourselves, trying our best this way or that to rationalize and let ourselves off the hook, only to experience, perhaps at the point of exhaustion and surrender, that we really are forgiven, that our lives are more whole and persistent than any inadequacy, and that we can live long and prosper, as the Vulcans say. The Spirit, again, has dipped from its endless song down into our mundane lives with a healing that goes beyond the narrow confines of our dark lamentations.

So, we've all experienced the Spirit of God. In fact, I would go further. We've all experienced the Spirit, or we wouldn't be here today. We wouldn't be anywhere. We would be dead. I have known a very few people so completely overwhelmed by lamentation that they were fully closed to the Spirit. Life so broken does not survive. If you're alive and prepared to go on living with any enthusiasm at all, it's because the Spirit has come to you. That same Spirit will come again, and again and again.

The whole ministry of Jesus is about making us *conscious* of the Spirit and active partners in the movement of the Spirit. Pentecost was always the goal of cross and resurrection. Ideally, the ministry of Jesus is about helping us to enter into the Spirit so

thoroughly that we truly are conscious of the way our life goes on in endless song above earth's lamentation. Jesus shows us how to cut away the bonds of lamentation that tie us so decisively to the transitory grief of earth.

When Jesus read from that scroll in his home town so many years ago and proclaimed that he himself was bringing the Spirit of God into the world, he meant that those who follow him will learn how to walk freely in partnership with this same Spirit. So here we are today.

You have experienced the Spirit. You have been shown the techniques. As your priest, I fully appreciate the defeats, fears, losses and lamentations that shut out the Spirit for many of us and bind us to earth. I appreciate what you're up against because I know what I'm up against.

Yet here we are. We are Christians, followers of Jesus. We've met the Spirit. We know the techniques. Release from poverty, freedom, sight, deliverance from oppression are close at hand for us. The song that is our truest life is going on above our lamentation whether we hear it this morning or not. It is endlessly present.

Will you follow Jesus into conscious partnership with the Spirit?

Will you look past the boundaries of lamentation into the infinitely more compelling eternity of the Spirit?

Will you accept the smile and embrace of your God who is well pleased with you, and in turn extend that same smile and embrace from your very soul to those around you who struggle yet with lamentation and stand in need of the Spirit?

For if the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, then *you* are anointed to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed, and to tell every soul everywhere that this is the year God smiles on us all.

As Jesus said, so say I: Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.

The Rev. David Hoster