

Who is the Holy Spirit?

Acts 1: 1-8

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I have always been a fan of science fiction. Therefore, I couldn't wait to see the new film that was being advertised in 1977. Sherry and I drove to the movie theater and after the previews, sat back to enjoy the film. It began with a stirring musical introduction followed by a series of words that marched up a blackened background of outer space. I nudged Sherry in the side and said, "This is going to be a good one." And so it was, a block buster summer movie that broke all kinds of attendance records. In case you haven't guessed, the movie we saw was "Star Wars." I can still hear the music and even repeat a portion of the message inscribed on the screen, "A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far, away...."

I was entranced by that movie and still am. In fact, I have a video copy of the film. Come over one evening and we'll watch it together along with a bag of popcorn and sodas. What was it about this film that so captivated my interest and attention? Was it the visuals, the futuristic technology or the actors? All of those things were great, but there was something else that really captured my attention. It can be summed up in the most memorable and oft quoted line from the movie, "May the force be with you."

This movie was built around the theme of an invisible power which was present and available for use by the characters in the film. It was like a vast energy field radiating throughout the universe, holding it all together, but also available to be used for good or evil by those who knew how to access its power. It was never described as being divine, but it did possess divine like capabilities. To be perfectly honest, it was more in line with Hindu theology than Christianity, especially the notion of "karma". But it did serve one vitally important purpose. It awakened people to the possibility that the universe and our little place here on earth within that universe is more than simply a collection of matter and energy. Could there be something of a more spiritual nature interacting with the physical realm in which we live? The Bible boldly declares there is, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Beginning this morning and continuing for the next four Sundays, we're going to take a look at this almost forgotten aspect of God's nature and character. For example, take a look at the Apostle's Creed. It spends a great deal of time describing God the Father and especially God the Son. But the description of the Holy Spirit is quite brief. It is reduced to one brief sentence, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." Nothing is said about who the Holy Spirit is or what He does. He just exists. Nevertheless, the Bible is filled with an overwhelming number of references to the Holy Spirit, beginning in the book of Genesis and continuing all the way to the book of Revelation.

So this morning let's begin by trying to come to a better understanding of who the Holy Spirit is and what He is up to in this world of ours. This is a simple definition that I came up with years ago and I believe that it's a good place for us to begin. The Holy Spirit is the presence and the

power of God at work in the world. We are introduced to Him in the second verse of the book of Genesis. Genesis, chapter one, verse two declares “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.” Do you understand the picture that is being painted for us? The earth was a watery sphere of matter devoid of any recognizable structure or life, waiting for the presence and power of God to begin shaping it into something that would be winsome and beautiful. We come away with the mental portrait of an artist shaping a lump of clay into something that will eventually be attractive and useful.

Perhaps that’s what Dorothy Sayers, an English dramatist and writer, had in mind when she came up with one of the most interesting descriptions of the triune nature of God. She said that God the Father is like an author who is contemplating, thinking about something which He desires to write. God the Son, Jesus Christ, is the self-portrait of the heavenly Father, the tangible expression of who He is, written in the flesh and blood of humanity. God the Spirit is like an author actually sitting down and beginning to compose this description of Himself which everyone will be able to read and understand. In other words, the Holy Spirit is the hands and feet of God at work in the world, a presence uniquely revealed in Christ Jesus, but also active and involved with humanity both before and after His advent. Although this description of the Trinity is inadequate, like all such descriptions are, it nevertheless corresponds with what Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians. He’s talking about Christ and how He was God’s secret plan for our redemption from ages past. But now we have been made aware of this secret because “God has revealed it to us by His Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:10). In other words, from the very beginning the Spirit of God was an integral part, an essential part, of His triune nature.

So when we talk about the third person of the Trinity, speaking of Him as the “Holy Spirit,” what do we mean? The word “holy” means special, one of kind, separate and distinct from everything else. The word “spirit” is the same word that is used in the Bible for that force of nature which we call the “wind.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus actually told Nicodemus that God’s Spirit is like the wind. He said, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going” (John 3:8). So as stated earlier, the Holy Spirit is the presence and the power of God at work in our world. We can sense His presence like a gentle breeze and we can also experience His more intense presence as He moves and shapes the world in which we live.

As we were reminded in the passage of Scripture that was read this morning, Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit after His departure into heaven. On the day of Pentecost that promise was fulfilled. Like a mighty wind, the Holy Spirit swept into the place where they were meeting and they were filled with the Spirit of God. The lives of Jesus’ followers were dramatically transformed. The book of Acts records some of the marvelous, even fantastic things which took place--from miraculous escapes to miracles of healing. One account in Acts 19:12 says that during Paul’s extended ministry in Ephesus, even pieces of cloth that he had touched were taken to the sick and they were healed. For that reason some Biblical commentators say the book of Acts should not be referred to as the “Acts of the Apostles,” as is often the case in some translations, but rather as the “Acts of the Holy Spirit.”

Personally, I believe they are correct because the ministry of the Holy Spirit has not come to an end. It did not stop after the original Apostles died during the first century of Christianity. The ministry of the Holy Spirit has continued throughout the centuries of Christianity and it is still very much a part of the world in which we live today. Furthermore, the ministry of the Holy Spirit can and, indeed, should be a part of our lives as Christians right here and right now. So in conclusion, let me share some observations with you that are worthy of being remembered and treasured.

- The Holy Spirit is divine. He is as much a part of God's nature and character as God the Father and God the Son. Without Him the divinity of God would be diminished. The Lord would not be the God who is revealed to us in the pages of the Bible.
- The Holy Spirit is eternal. He's been the dynamic part of God's being from the beginning. At the moment in which the earth and all of the universe was created, the Holy Spirit was there shaping and molding the world in which we now live.
- The Holy Spirit is personal. He is not an inanimate force of nature that can be harnessed to meet our demands and desires. He is the personal presence and power of God at work in the world and at work in our lives as Christians. As Jesus promised in the Gospel of John, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:26). If the Holy Spirit is a Counselor, He is a person, someone with whom we can establish an ongoing relationship.

In closing I am reminded of Jim Cymbala, the pastor of the Brooklyn Tabernacle, the one whose videos we watched during last year's prayer emphasis. I met him years ago during a Franklin Graham Crusade. I wish I could tell you that he was a very impressive, charismatic speaker that commanded everyone's attention. Just the opposite. He was a rather quiet, shy individual who spoke to us without any of the intensity or fervor that I had expected. Nevertheless, I knew that he was the pastor of a vibrant church in the heart of a decadent, crime-ridden part of New York City. His congregation occupied a beautifully restored theater that seats hundreds of people. The church's choir was known all around the world. Even more importantly, if you will remember from the video series, countless numbers of drug addicts, prostitutes, and other people living on the edge of oblivion, had been redeemed and saved by Jesus Christ, restored to meaningful and purposeful lives. How did that happen? Both he and his church family would be quick to tell you that their lives and the life of their church has been immersed in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

So let me ask you, "Is that what we need in our lives as individuals and in the life of our church? Harkening back to that thematic declaration in the Star Wars movie, do you think we should revise it, maybe just a little bit. Instead of saying, "May the force be with you," perhaps a better declaration might be, "MAY THE HOLY SPIRIT BE WITH YOU."