

Bent Over the World

Genesis 1:1-5

Sermon by Dan Schrock

July 26, 2015

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Today I begin a series of sermons on the Holy Spirit. For many of us in this congregation, the Holy Spirit is probably the person of the Trinity we think about, talk about, and pray to the least often. For four years I was a member of a Mennonite church in another state where the co-pastors almost never talked about the Holy Spirit, except on Pentecost Sunday. The rest of the time they talked about Jesus Christ or God the Father.

I have the impression that many Mennonites focus on the first person of the Trinity, traditionally called the Father, and on the second person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ. The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit? Not so much. We just don't give the Spirit much air time. This hasn't always been the case, however. The first generation of Anabaptists gave a great deal of attention to the Holy Spirit. For a variety of reasons, the second generation of Anabaptists dropped that emphasis on the Spirit and instead gave it to Jesus Christ. Ever since then quite a few Mennonites have been much more enamored with Christ than with the Spirit.

Some streams of the worldwide Christian church celebrate the person and work of the Spirit with great energy. For the last hundred years, the Pentecostal and charismatic churches have been passionate about the Holy Spirit, and today many of those churches are thriving in just about every way imaginable. A number of churches that identify with Mennonite World Conference are also Pentecostal or charismatic in orientation, and they too are robust.

Our congregation is neither Pentecostal nor charismatic, but we can still celebrate the power and presence of the Spirit. I do not think we have to be Pentecostal or charismatic in order to appreciate the Spirit. Like the other two members of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is complex. Sometimes the Spirit can be noisy and dramatic and a bit unruly, while at other times the Spirit can be so quiet and subtle and gentle that if you're not paying close attention, you'll completely miss what's going on.

In this series I want to try and identify some of this complexity. Each Sunday I'll pick a different biblical text that seems to tell us something important about what the Spirit does and what roles the Spirit takes on in the life of the world and the life of the church. I won't pretend to be comprehensive because there's a lot more we could say about the Spirit that's important. But at least I want to make a beginning.

Our biblical text today is the first set of verses from Genesis. Depending on the translation you read, you might not see that the Holy Spirit has anything to do with the creation of the world. The NRSV, for instance, translates the last part of verse 2 like this: "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." That word "wind" comes from the Hebrew word *ruah*, which can also be translated as "spirit." Some English translations do use the word spirit; the old King James Version even gave it a capital "S" to suggest that this wind or spirit from God is in fact the Holy Spirit. For our purposes today, let's go ahead and assume that this wind or spirit is none other than the Holy Spirit at work in the creation of the world. Using this text as the basis for our reflections, I'd like to suggest three things about the Holy Spirit.

First, the Holy Spirit collaborates with God. In the imaginative world of the story, there were at the beginning only two entities: there was God, and there

was also a formless void. The story is not interested in where these two entities came from or how they came to be. The story simply says that at the very beginning, God already existed and a formless void already existed.

So how does the Spirit fit into this? Well, the Spirit blows from God into the formless void. We might think of the Spirit as God's creative energy, as the tool God uses to get the process of creation underway. The Spirit shares with God the same divine essence, the same holy desire, the same passion to bring forth a new world from this formless void. When the Spirit does something, it is also God doing something. And when God does something, it is the Spirit who provides the energy to achieve the task. The first person and third persons of the Trinity collaborate to get this job done.

We see this dynamic happening all over again in the ministry of Jesus. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Spirit descends on Jesus at the moment of his baptism, and then remains with Jesus throughout his ministry. Again, it's a collaboration, this time between the second and third persons of the Trinity. The Spirit gives Jesus energy and motivation, and makes it possible for Jesus to complete his mission successfully. Collaboration, mutual commitment, and creativity are hallmarks for all three members of the Trinity.

Second, the Spirit is deeply involved in the natural world. The Spirit is not far off, disinterested, and uninvolved. Instead, the Spirit permeates creation.

The birthing of creation is a process. Genesis 1 tells a story about creation happening over a period of seven days. We should not get side-tracked here by our scientific minds. Genesis 1 is not a scientific report, peer reviewed by other scientists and then published in a prestigious scientific journal. Instead, Genesis 1 was more likely written to be used in worship services. It has a liturgical quality of call and response. The words are poetic, not scientific. They are crafted to praise God, not to prove a hypothesis.

The point of the story, therefore, is not whether all this happened in seven consecutive twenty-four-hour days. The real point is that the birthing of creation unfolded over time as an extended and intricate process—a process in which the Spirit was intimately involved. From this we can extrapolate that the Holy Spirit continues to be very much involved in creation, even today. The process of creation has not stopped. Every day new baby birds are hatched, new trees sprouted, new animals conceived. From scientific research we know that over time new species evolve and come into being. Creation is tremendously dynamic, and the Spirit is at work in the thick of it all.

Other stories later in the Bible show us that the Holy Spirit calls women and men to ministry and service. Eventually the Holy Spirit will also birth the church. But let us never forget that the Spirit's first arena of work is out there in the world, in the atoms and chemicals of creation. The Spirit is everywhere in this world, not just in the church. In the words of the NRSV, this Spirit of God “swept” over the face of the waters (v. 2). The Hebrew verb for “swept” can also mean to hover watchfully, like a vigilant mother bird hovers watchfully over a nest. It's a wonderful image to keep in our minds: the Spirit, like a mother bird, hovering over the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, over Africa and Asia, over South America and North America.

Third, the Spirit summons and invites. Notice the words God uses to speak to the formless void: “Let there be light” (v. 3). God uses this same way of speaking throughout Genesis 1: let there be a dome (v. 6), let the waters be gathered (v. 9), let the earth put forth vegetation (v. 11), and so on. These “let there be” verbs are all in the jussive mood. We don't have this grammatical mood in English, but in Hebrew the jussive is always a command. However, it can range from a hard, definitive command to a soft, more open-ended command which is more like a wish. In all cases, the jussive has a voluntary element, which means

that when you hear the command can refuse to comply. You can say no, I won't do that.¹

God, in other words, is not an autocrat. God, in collaboration with the Spirit, gives creation some free will. The Spirit does not force us or make iron-clad demands of us. Instead the Spirit invites, summons, entices, woos, persuades. All of creation, including we humans, have the freedom to refuse. But even then God will not insist. In the wake of our no, the Spirit will continue to invite us, hoping that we will say yes, wanting us to join in with the creative work God wants to do in the world. As you might guess, this takes enormous and extraordinary patience from the Spirit. For thousands of years, the Spirit has been summoning us, inviting us; and when we refuse—as we often do—the Spirit keeps inviting. What incredible patience!

One of my favorite poems is “God’s Grandeur,” by Gerard Manley Hopkins. “The world is charged with the grandeur of God . . .,” he writes, “Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”

It’s a lovely image: the Holy Spirit bent over the earth, brooding with warmth and light, inviting us, wanting us, waiting for us, working to give us life.

¹ Eugene F. Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Genesis* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1987), 27.