

The Experience of Spirit
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Here we are again, with one of those head scratching topics that John's gospel loves to throw at us. Once again, he makes us think and he makes us work. Doesn't he know we're busy people?

Today's difficult or confusing topic is the Spirit. Now, if John were the only biblical writer to mention the Spirit, maybe it wouldn't be so difficult; but John is one of several who mention the spirit and his understanding of the spirit differs from the others. In fact, no two writers seem to agree on what the spirit even is.

Let me give you just a sampling of spirit metaphors and how they differ:

The first chapter of the book of Genesis begins, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind (or spirit) swept over the waters" (1.1-2). The writer of that creation parable understands the Spirit as the creative power of God that brings possibilities into manifestation. The Spirit is God in action according to Genesis 1.

In the book of 2 Kings, we read that "...Elisha said to Elijah, 'May I receive a double portion of your spirit'" (2.9). That writer understands the spirit to be the power of God active in the life of a teacher or prophet that can be transmitted to a devoted student.

The psalmist prays, "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51.10-11). That hymn writer seems to understand the spirit as the life-force, both the vitality of the human person and the divine presence in the life of the human person.

The Apostle Paul said, "Hope does not disappoint because the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5.5). For Paul, the spirit is the channel of divine blessings. God gives gifts of empowerment, such as the ability to understand, or to teach, or to heal, or to express hope and love and God gives these gifts through this divine channel called the Spirit.

Mark saw the spirit as God's way of communicating that Jesus was an anointed teacher and liberator. The first chapter of his gospel tells us that "On coming up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him" (Mark 1.10).

Luke sees the spirit as God's way of energizing the early church. We read in Acts, "Suddenly there came from the sky a noise like a strong driving wind, and it filled the entire house...and they were all filled with the holy Spirit..." (2.2, 4). Some teachers, such as charismatic healer Agnes Sanford, have even suggested that this was the 2nd coming. The power of God energizes the church to be the living, thriving Body of Christ, so that Christ has returned in our shared mission of sharing the Light with the world. Whether Luke was suggesting that or not, he was clearly presenting the spirit as the way God chose to jump start the Christian movement.

In the 20th chapter of John's gospel, the writer has the resurrected Christ breathe on frightened disciples, saying, "...Receive the holy breath (spirit)" (20.22). The image is one of healing, comfort, refreshment, and restoration.

And in today's reading, John has Jesus saying, "I will ask [God]...to give you another Helper to be with you always" (John 14.16). Jesus has been helping people discover the way of empowerment, the truth of their sacred value, and the life of indomitable hope. Jesus has been helping them understand that God is already available to them, dwelling within them and expressing through them. And now that he is gone, there is ANOTHER helper, an on-going presence to help them understand that they are in God and God is in them.

It would have been nice if any two people in a thousand year span could have agreed on what they meant by "spirit." But no such luck. How do we explain the differing views of the spirit, none of which match statements that will show up later in the creeds?

I think it's important for us to remember that explanation is not experience, and image is not essence. These writers are doing what writers do, they are selecting images to communicate their message, but as useful as the images are, image is not essence.

And they make very little attempt to explain what they mean. They are much better at acknowledging and celebrating the spirit than they are at explaining it. And even if they could explain it, the best explanation is still not the same as the experience.

Maybe our spiritual ancestors were very wise to not overly explain the phenomenon we call "spirit." Trapping the mystery of life into a creed has caused more problems than it has solved, and maybe the bible writers were intentionally avoiding that. They didn't need to tell us "what" it was; they trusted that if we were open to it, we would experience it whatever it was. Our task isn't to understand some finer point of complicated dogma; the point is that God is very active in our lives, relentlessly trying to empower us with gifts of hope, peace, and joy.

The breath of God, the wind of God, the presence of God, the power of God, the activity of God, the spirit of God...call it what you will, but don't miss the point that John specifically tries to make: God has not left us alone, hopeless or helpless. We have the helping presence of God, by whatever name we choose to call it. It is in us and we are in it and with it all things are possible. On that, the bible writers did agree; and so can we. This is the good news! Amen.

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*The spirit of God blesses my body.
The spirit of God blesses my mind.
The spirit of God blesses my life.
The spirit of God fills me with hope and joy.
I am Spirit-filled.
Alleluia!
Amen.*

