

Repentance and the Holy Spirit

Psalms 29 *...and in God's temple all say, "Glory!"*

Acts 19:1-7 *"No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."*

We are now in the season of Epiphany. Today's scripture readings are filled with images of light, wind, and spirit. The power of God in and over all of creation. The story of creation, God's spirit hovering above the chaotic waters like a giant bird, poised to bring life-giving order out of chaos. Psalm 29 that speaks of God's dominion over the creation, like a powerful wind. Our response can only be an awe-filled gasp in our own spirits--"Glory!"--as we become aware of the Spirit that is at the heart of everything.

What does this Spirit have to do with our own lives?

Paul travels to Ephesus where he finds some "disciples." Paul asks them if they have received the Holy Spirit. They answer that they did not even know there was a Holy Spirit. They were baptized into John's baptism of repentance. Being sorry for sins. Having the desire to live a new life. Wanting to turn around and go in the right direction. That sort of thing. Paul tells them that John's baptism was the first step. It pointed to something else, someone else...Jesus and the life of being filled, directed, and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The Ephesians are baptized again, this time in the name of Jesus. Paul lays his hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit and begin prophesying and speaking in tongues. That is the early church's way of talking about what happens when you are filled with God's spirit. You are able to see into and speak the truth about life, a truth that comes from God. It is a whole new and different perspective. You see yourself and the world in the light of God's reality and sovereignty over everything. You begin to discover what it means to live your life in response to the movements of God's spirit. You see your own life as the chaotic waters over which the spirit of God hovers, bringing about a new order, a new life.

Repentance and the receiving of the Holy Spirit. This is the dynamics of the life of faith. Repentance. We look in us and around us and we things to change, to be different. We are disturbed by injustice, despondent because of perpetual war or the systematic assault on God's creation. So we collapse either into righteous indignation or despair. But the message for today tells us that there is something else we can do. It starts with us. Repentance. Looking at ourselves and the way we are living. Are we really living as those who believe that God is sovereign creator of the universe? Does that belief live in the center of our being so that it is expressed through our own spirits and minds and actions? Repentance involves self-examination, being aware of areas of our own lives, our own hearts and minds that need attention, that need changing.

This is an on-going practice or discipline for us. If we find ourselves assuming that everyone else needs to change but we're fine, then that's a signal that we've abandoned the process of our own transformation, of growth. We've become like the Pharisees and scribes, blind to our own participation in the very things we criticize in others.

So repentance is looking squarely and honestly at ourselves. Do I find myself always dissatisfied and angry at others or at life around me? Then I need to look in the other direction, not outward but inward. Something needs changing in me. And if I'm working on that, then I will find a way of living that will make a real difference in other people and life around me, not just add to the problems.

But repentance is not the whole thing. If we are stuck in repentance, we still see the spiritual life, the life of faith as something we accomplish. But it's not. It is something God creates in us. Those Ephesians told Paul, "We didn't know that there was such a thing as the Holy Spirit." We've been working with this repentance stuff, you know, examining our lives, being sorry for our sins, trying to be good people. That's not enough, Paul says. That's only part of the journey, the first step. Paul tells them that John's baptism pointed to another kind of baptism, baptism into Jesus Christ, into the very life we are looking for, the life of God's kingdom. It is the life that is filled with and led by God's spirit, the spirit that brooded over the chaos and brought about a life-giving order, the spirit that is the invisible force within and behind the whole world around us, like the wind causing the oaks to whirl. The spirit that will empower in you the very life you are seeking, the life of a true human being, made in God's image, made to love, to rejoice, to bear witness to truth. That's what you need. The Holy Spirit.

And so they are baptized by Paul into Christ and begin prophesying and speaking in tongues. Speaking at a deeper level, beyond the superficial jargon that dominates our society's life at all levels. The church is the community that lives by God's spirit, a community where things are talked about that matter--human need and suffering and injustice, and the ways we can respond. It is the community where we can share the deepest truths of our lives--our fears, our failures, our pains, our struggles--and in that sharing find the strange power of God's spirit making us new, giving us strength and healing and courage. This kind of speaking is the sign of a community giving itself over to God's spirit.

We can't remain stuck in repentance, perpetually being sorry for our sins so that we are moping around in guilt and wretchedness. That's what turns many people off to Christianity. There is a kind of Christian spirituality that is exclusively "amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me." We do act like wretches sometime. But we are NOT wretches. Jesus never talked like that. He saw people going in the wrong directions. He called people to change. But he never called anyone a wretch, never saw anyone as unable to become who God had

made them to be. That's why we can't stay in a repentance mode all the time. There is more to it. There is that next step...opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit, to the power of God that empowers in us our true nature as God's daughters and sons.

How can we do this? How can we be sure we are practicing BOTH repentance and being open to God's spirit?

We can say: I am not the center of the universe. When I am arrogant or prideful, when I am pushing my own agenda for life, I don't have the right perspective. Likewise, when I sink into self-pity or guilt, I am also taking myself as the center of the universe. I am not in control of life. God is. I don't find my life by trying to hold onto it, as Jesus said, by gripping it tightly in a sense of self-importance. I find my true life by opening outward, by seeing myself within the whole of creation and experiencing awe and humility.

We can remember: I am not in control of life. Often when I am trying to pray a prayer of confession, I see so much about myself and life that discourages me that I end up simply praying: God, I am a mess and the world is a mess. This makes me open to God's spirit that is always hovering over the mess of life, poised to bring about something new. I also try to remember that I am not in control of anything in life except myself, and I control precious little of that. This is not irresponsibility. It is reality. I cannot control other people, and if I try, even out of what I think are loving motivations, I end up doing damage. We can live our own lives as faithfully as we can, but we cannot make anyone else do what we think they ought to do. We can speak the truth about life as God means it to be, and we do need to do that. But we cannot force our truth on another human being. The moment we start rolling up our sleeves and fighting for our version of truth, we turn other people into enemies and we have abandoned the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth of non-violent compassion and servanthood. When we accept the fact that we are not in control but God is, then we experience tremendous liberation and can live as witnesses to the sovereignty of God in all things. But we do it in a way that does not contribute to the violence around us. This is being open to God's spirit.

A life open to God's spirit is always trying to keep open to new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing things. It doesn't get locked into how things have always been or how I think everything should be. It is having the mind of Christ that says, "Not my will but yours be done, O God." So we practice letting go of our will, our current way of looking at things, and we keep ourselves open to the new thing God wants to do in us and through us. That's the story of this church, isn't it? Striving to see things as God wants them to be. A perspective that can look at an abandoned old building and see beautiful apartments for low-income people or a center for community in the inner city. A perspective that can look deeply into a person, see them for who they really are and not who

we want them to be, and say, "Hey, do you know that you have a real gift for listening, or hospitality, or sensitivity to injustice, or expressing the truth of life through art?" It is a perspective that looks at ourselves and says, "Yes, I am a small and even wounded person, but I feel this call of Christ and have this gift that God has given me, and I will give myself to it."

I call this growing in our ability to be detached. I don't mean disconnected. I mean the ways that we all get attached to how we want the world or other people to be, how we think things should go, and even how we want ourselves to be. And so we get disappointed, angry, discouraged, and generally miserable because we aren't relinquishing our desire to control everything. Detachment is part of every major spiritual tradition. When we open up to the reality of God and God's sovereignty over life, then we have to let go of how we want things to be. We have to recognize and detach from our expectations of people, including ourselves, and life around us. Years ago I was having lunch with Morris Shapiro, then the rabbi of Agudath Sholom Synagogue. I fell into complaining about the church and people in the church, when he said, "My friend, you must learn to accept the world as it is, not as you want it to be." That's the first step toward seeing God in the world, really in the world. We stop seeing the world only through the grid of our expectations and hopes and plans. The Gospel of John says that God loved the world so much that God have the only Son, that God did not send the Son in order to condemn the world but to bring wholeness, salvation, to the world. Acceptance. That's how God relates to the world and to us. That's how God starts to bring new life, through profound, loving acceptance. That is the beginning of change and new life.

Our inward journey gives us the opportunity to be faithfully involved in this process of repentance and receiving the Holy Spirit. We develop our capacity to look honestly at our lives and see where we need to change, to let go, to open up to God's spirit. We can see when we are getting stuck in repentance, obsessed with our failings or guilt. Then we practice letting go of all that so that we can open up to God's spirit that is hovering over the chaos of our lives to bring about our new, our true lives. "We did not even know there was a Holy Spirit." As I thought about those words this week, I thought that they are important for us, too. We know ABOUT the Holy Spirit, God's spirit of new life. But living BY that spirit is something that calls for our faithful and constant attention, an inward journey that touches daily both repentance and receiving God's spirit. Out of that inward journey will arise our outward journey of living in the world in new ways. It's a whole new and different way of living. Living by God's spirit can look and feel like chaos to us. But the more we practice it, the more we see it is the way we participate in God's on-going creation and re-creation of life.