

Repentance and the Holy Spirit

Genesis 1:1-5 ...while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.
Psalm 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."
Mark 1:4-11 "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you
 with the Holy Spirit."

We are now in the season following Epiphany, which invites us to reflect on God's presence revealed throughout the creation and in Jesus Christ. Today's scripture readings are filled with images of light, wind, and spirit. The spirit of God hovering over the primeval waters, poised to bring ordered life out of chaos. Psalm 29 flashes with images of God's dynamic presence throughout the creation, like a powerful wind and a mighty voice. Our response can only be an awe-filled gasp--"Glory!"--as we become aware of the Spirit that is at the heart of everything.

How might we see our own lives in relation to God's spirit and how it works in us? The stories of Jesus' baptism and of Paul's visit to Ephesus can help us.

John is baptizing people in the waters of the sacred Jordan River. People flock to him, eager to experience the forgiveness of their sins. But even as he baptizes them, John says that someone else is coming who is greater, who will baptize people in God's own spirit. Forgiveness of sins is good, but there is more.

A generation later, Paul travels to Ephesus where he finds some "disciples." Paul asks them if they have received the Holy Spirit. They reply that they did not know there was such a thing. They were baptized into John's baptism of repentance--being sorry for sins, desiring to live a new life, to turn around and go in the right direction...that sort of thing. Paul tells them that John's baptism was a first step toward something else, someone else...Jesus and a life immersed in God's spirit. So, Paul baptizes them in the name of Jesus, lays his hands on them and they receive the Holy Spirit.

Repentance and receiving God's spirit. This is at the core of Christian spiritual life and growth. Repentance has to do with looking within us and around us, and seeing what needs to change. Outwardly, we see injustice, perpetual war, the assault on God's creation, and many other things. We may either rise up in righteous indignation or sink into despair. But the message from today's readings tells us that there is something else we can do. It starts with us. It is repentance, looking at ourselves individually and as a society and human family, at the ways we are living, and desiring and seeking a change. Repentance involves self-examination, being aware of areas of our lives, our hearts and our minds 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 are fine, then we have abandoned the process of our own transformation, our own growth. We've become like the Pharisees and scribes, blind to our own participation in the very things we criticize.

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

The spiritual life, however, is not completely about what WE do—self-examination, the will to change, and so forth. It is about something God does for us and

He leaned forward slightly and said in a very rabbinical way, "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, and even our knowledge. The Gospel of John says that God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus not in order to condemn the world but to bring wholeness, healing, salvation. 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 is the way we work with this ongoing process of repentance and receiving the Holy Spirit. We practice looking honestly at our lives, seeing where we need to change, to let go, to open up to God's spirit. We learn to recognize when we are getting stuck, obsessed with our failings or guilt or whatever. 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, poised 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 realized what they might mean for us. 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, self-examination and self-understanding AND letting go, opening up, receiving God's spirit. Out of that inward journey will arise our outward journey of living in the world in new ways. 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 ongoing creation and re-creation of life.

in us, the work of God's spirit. The Ephesians told Paul, "We didn't know that there is 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 baptism, baptism into Jesus Christ, into the very life we are looking for, the life of God's kingdom. It is the life filled with and led by God's spirit, the spirit that brooded over the chaos and brought about a life-giving order, 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 in tongues was a first century spiritual exercise in which a person would babble in an unknown language and someone else might interpret it. Something like this goes on today in some religious gatherings. Paul did not put much stock in it. "If I speak in the tongues of human beings and of angels," he wrote, "but do not have love, I am a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal (1 Cor. 13)." For Paul, following Jesus was about the way we live toward others, not exhibiting special spiritual abilities.

As I thought about this speaking in tongues bit, it occurred to me that the kind of speaking that comes to us with God's spirit can mean speaking at a deeper level, beyond the superficialities, trivialities, and false values that are part of our society's life. I had the opportunity to experience this in a dramatic way in 1985 when I travelled into what was then East Germany, to the city of Rostock. I was with Dr. Pat Kelly, then professor of religious studies at Lynchburg College, and Guido Wolatz, a young pastor from Berlin who was our guide, translator, and driver as we sped into what he called the "Deep East" in his Volkswagen. We met one night in a church fellowship hall with students from the university. I learned and experienced that evening that the churches were "free spaces" where students could voice their concerns, ideas, hopes, and dreams, fairly assured that agents of the government were not listening in.

When we are a community that lives by God's spirit, things are talked about that matter--human need and suffering and injustice, and the ways we can respond. We are a community where people can share the deepest truths of their lives—their fears, failures, pains, struggles—and in that sharing touch the power of God's spirit that makes us new, gives us strength and healing and courage. This kind of speaking is the sign of a community giving itself over to God's spirit. It is this kind of speaking that is part of what we call "accountability," sharing with others how we are really doing with our spiritual lives, our commitments, our struggles, our difficulties, our joys, our pains. It is also how we share with each other our dreams, the things we may feel God is calling us to do with our lives, and what we think are the gifts God has given us to share.

Repentance is a very important word for us. In the Greek text it is *metanoia*, and it means more than just feeling sorry for our sins or acknowledging our brokenness or weakness. It means having a new mind, a new way of seeing and living. It is recognizing what needs to change, even acknowledging feelings of sorrow or guilt or regret. It does not, however, mean being stuck in feeling sorry for our sins and moping around in guilt and wretchedness. 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 sometimes. 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. He said we are the light of the world and the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13-16). The

process of repentance also includes opening ourselves to God's spirit that empowers in us our true nature as God's daughters and sons.

How can we practice repentance and being open to God's spirit? We do it through what we call the inward journey. We devote time on a regular, daily basis to giving attention to our lives in relation to God. We look at our lives, examining ourselves to see what needs changing, what is causing us suffering and distancing us from God, others and ourselves. But we do this compassionately, not turning our inner life into a battlefield. The change comes through deeper understanding and acceptance, not through self-punishment or berating ourselves. Practicing repentance in this way means being completely honest with ourselves about the whole of our lives—the good, bad, and ugly! And yet not in a self-judging or condemning way.

I find that it also helps to remind ourselves of a couple of things. First, 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 view. When I sink into self-pity or guilt, that is not the right view either. Both kinds of self-centeredness—arrogance and self-demeaning—are barriers to living as we are made to live. We find our true life by opening outward, by seeing ourselves within the whole of creation and experiencing awe and humility, the kind of thing Psalm 29 is talking about.

Second, we can remind ourselves frequently: I am not in charge of life. Often when I am trying to pray a prayer of confession, aware of so much about myself and life that needs changing, I end up simply praying: God, I am a mess and the world is a mess. This opens me to God's spirit that is always hovering over the mess of life, poised to bring about something new. The prayer of confession we have each Sunday morning is not a time for listing our faults and figuring out what we are going to do about them. It is simply a time to be in touch with whatever keeps us from living in the freedom, love, compassion, and joy that is part of our created being. A part of our prayer of confession is also the awareness of how powerless we are to change all these things. This opens our spirits to God's spirit.

Being open to God's spirit means being open to new ways of thinking, new ways of seeing things. We don't get locked into how things used to be or how we think they 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 community, isn't it, trying to see things as God wants them to be? Looking at an old building and seeing beautiful apartments for low-income people or a center for community in the inner city, for instance. Or looking at a person, seeing them for who they really are and not who we want them to be, and saying, "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 looking at ourselves and saying, "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 and see where it takes me."

All of this has to do with 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, and how we think things should go. We get attached to how we want ourselves to be and we put labels on ourselves—unworthy, broken, handicapped, unimportant, and so forth. Learning to let go of our attachments is so important. It is part of every major spiritual tradition. When we open up to God's spirit, we have to let go of how we want things to be, even how we think things are.

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.