

Sealed (Week 2) - The Holy Spirit

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. Two of the images buried within the PCUSA seal/logo refer to the same broad subject matter - the Holy Spirit. Given this redundancy, you know that it must be an essential part of our Presbyterian identity. Specifically, the Spirit is seen as a "dove" and a pair of "flames." In order to understand both, we need to connect their Old Testament uses with their New Testament occurrences, because the former is meant to inform the latter.



2. First, let's dive into God's Spirit who is like a dove. You encounter this image almost immediately in scripture: in [Genesis 1.2](#), we're told that God's Spirit hovered above the chaotic void pre-creation. Intertestamental Jewish teachers understand this to be like a mother dove hovering over her nest. Far from a forceful image, God's Spirit is shown to be maternal and gentle, even when working to create or bring order from disarray.

3. The flood narrative of Genesis (Genesis 6-8) is understood by many Old Testament scholars to be an un- or de-creation due to humanity's rampant, deep evil ([Genesis 6.5-6](#)), returning the world to its primordial state of desolation and emptiness, followed by re-creation. Thus, it's not surprising to find a dove within the story, tied to this re-creation: as God's Spirit hovered like a dove in the first acts of creation in Genesis 1, now a dove signals that re-creation has occurred ([Genesis 8.10-12](#)).

4. You can only understand the meaning of God's Spirit descending upon Jesus at His baptism if you are first familiar with its O.T. ties ([Luke 3.21-22](#)). Here's how biblical scholar N. T. Wright describes that linkage: "The descent of the Spirit as a dove...echoes the brooding Spirit over the waters of creation and Noah's dove in Genesis 8. Jesus is being revealed as the locus of God's new creation, anointed for a ministry of gentle restoration." Perhaps not surprisingly, for the first 300 years of church history the dove was one of two central symbols of Christianity (the fish, or ichthus, was the other; the cross was a marginal symbol at most).

5. So when we think of God's Spirit as a dove, we are to remember that Jesus Christ is the beginning, catalyst, and centerpiece of God's new creation at work in the world. And part of new creation, understood biblically, is God through Christ bringing order to disorder, calm to chaos, peace to disharmony, and function to dysfunction: as Cuban-American theologian Miguel De La Torre writes, "The good news is that God's Spirit still hovers over the formless void of broken lives and the great darkness in which the marginalized find themselves...Our God is hovering over us, ready to begin a new work, ready to bring life from what feels to us like death." Want to find God at work in your life? Look in the places that are in disarray, or are confused, or are an abject mess. Want to catch sight of God's Spirit at work in the world? Look in the same kind of places.

6. Moreover, this idea that God's Spirit is the dove of new creation speaks to Christian mission, and what it really is fundamentally or at root. Again hear the words of N. T. Wright: "What are you supposed to be doing [as a Christian]? We are meant to be new creation. We are meant to be the small working model of God's ultimate new creation...Jesus' followers are to be performance artists of new creation in a world caught between the ruin of the old and the birth of the new...What we do now - in working for justice, in seeking peace, in creating beauty, in caring for the poor - are signposts pointing to God's good and final future."

7. Now let's switch to that 2nd image for God's Spirit in the PCUSA seal - flames. The most common image for a "theophany" (appearance of God) in the book of Exodus is fire or flames: e.g., God calls Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt in the burning bush ([Exodus 3.2](#)), God travels with Israel after their liberation from Egypt as a pillar of fire ([13.21-22](#)), the giving of the Law is accompanied with God's presence shown as fire ([19.18](#)), and a pillar of fire denoting God's presence stood above the mobile temple called The Tabernacle ([40.38](#)).

8. So when we get to The Acts of the Apostles chapter 2 and the coming of the Spirit upon Jesus' disciples as tongues of flame ([Acts 2.2-3](#)), we know that we should understand this event in light of its O.T. precedent: now every single Christian can be a burning bush, can have God's presence in the dark like a pillar of fire, etc. Note the universality of the gift of the Spirit - it was to everyone, no exceptions, regardless of tenure in the faith, age, education level, gender, and so on.

9. So when we consider that God's Spirit is like fire in our lives and among us, we realize that every bush can be a burning bush, all ground is potentially holy ground. That is, God's Spirit is ever-present with us and in our world and we might be surprised where we see the Spirit if we just pay attention. Likewise, we are assured that God's Spirit goes before us like a torch in our darkness: as rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "God does not promise us a life without night; He promises that when we walk through the valley of the shadow, His light precedes and surrounds us, turning the darkness into an act of faith."

10. But maybe most of all we are supposed to realize through Acts 2 and its connection to Exodus that God's Spirit with us makes each one of us a living, breathing, walking temple of God in and through whom others can be connected to God. One more time, listen to the words of N. T. Wright: "At Pentecost...the glory of God comes down to inhabit not a building made with hands, but a human community. The tongues of fire dividing and resting on each person signal that every believer is now a mini-temple, a consecrated shrine, a living sanctuary of the Holy Spirit."

A Prayer for the Week

Holy God, your Spirit hovered over the waters of creation and descended like a dove upon Christ, declaring that Your new creation has begun and Your peace will prevail over every kind of disorder and chaos. May I be open to the harmony Your Spirit wants to bring to my life and may I be an agent of the reconciliation Your Spirit seeks for our world.

Holy God, like Moses of old catching sight of the burning bush, may my eyes be open to the Spirit's movement that unfolds in my everyday moments and ordinary routines.

Holy God, Your Spirit is like a refining fire, burning away my fear, apathy, biases, and self-preoccupation. May I yield to Your cleansing work in my life by which You free me to live more fully and love more deeply.

And, holy God, by Your Spirit You have made me - and each Christian - into a living, breathing, walking temple through which others might encounter Your presence and welcome. May I live in such a way that my friends, neighbors, strangers, and even enemies find you in my every word, action, and attitude, amen.

Explore More This Week

- This article was written for Pentecost 2018; it talks through why the Spirit is so crucial to what it means to be Presbyterian: [What Presbyterians Believe | Presbyterian Church \(U.S.A.\)](#)
- Here are two short videos from The Bible Project on God's Spirit in scripture: [Why the Holy Spirit Isn't Just a "Force"](#) and [Ruakh = God's personal presence or Spirit](#)
- KirkWood's friend and trusted voice, Trevor Hudson, wrote a book on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit work in our lives, and how we can experience God's Spirit day to day: [Holy Spirit Here and Now: Hudson, Trevor](#)
- Last, spend some time this week considering how God's Spirit and the Spirit's manifold work is described fully but simply and elegantly in one of our PCUSA creeds, The Declaration of Faith (1977), chapter 5: [A Declaration of Faith](#)