

Where The Spirit Moves

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor...

The Spirit of the Lord rushes through Isaiah.

The telltale sign which verifies that he is taken up and into the Spirit is that good news is brought to the poor.

Captives are freed.

The blind see.

The deaf hear.

But the Spirit doesn't stop with Isaiah.

This same Spirit drives John the Baptist from the comforts of his upper class home.

John the Baptist, you will recall, is the only son of a priestly family.

He's from the elite.

Yet, because the Spirit consumes him too, John makes his way out into the wilderness.

Out to a place of new beginnings.

Out to a people who know they need a new start.

The Spirit is still not finished.

Soon, it's Jesus who appears at the river's edge.

Jesus upon whom the Spirit falls.

Jesus who, filled with the Spirit, is pushed deep into the lonely desert, where he, for a long time, confronts his own demons.

He returns as the One through whom the unpredictable, good-troublemaking, whimsical Spirit, invades the whole wide world.

"Are you the one who is to come, or do we wait for another?" John's disciples ask of Jesus.

And the Spirit-filled Jesus tells the Spirit-filled followers of the Spirit-filled John to listen again to what Spirit-filled Isaiah envisions so long ago:

"Go tell John what you see and hear:

The blind see!

The lame walk!

Lepers are cleansed!

The deaf hear!

The dead are raised!

The poor have good news proclaimed to them!”

But the Spirit doesn't stop there.

After the ministry, after the arrest and torture and execution of Jesus, while his best friends sit frightened, huddled in a dark upper room, this same Spirit blows away their cold feet!

Blows away their insecurities!

Dancing, like tongues of fire, over each and every once-bowed head.

The Spirit drives them out of that place and into the world, where they tell everyone with ears to hear, that the Spirit of God is alive — and on the move!

As she binds up the wounded and frees the captives, bringing good news to the poor!

Because this same uncontainable and un-restrainable Spirit is alive and on the move in every generation, ever since.

You'll remember St. Francis, who, like John the Baptist, comes from a privileged home.

Yet when the Spirit sweeps though him, there he stands, face to face, with filthy-rich dear old dad.

As Francis strips off his Armani suit and alligator shoes, his nakedness symbolizes a new, utterly unpredictable, life.

A life that includes kissing those with leprosy, feeding the hungry, and seeking peace with Muslims during the Crusades.

The Spirit isn't done yet.

Who is taken up by this Spirit of God today?

Who are the anointed ones today?

You are!

At your baptism, the very same Spirit that animates Isaiah, that sends John into the desert, that propels the ministry and resurrection of Jesus, that creates the church through the first apostles, that moves so many throughout history, that same Spirit — is in you!

And you are in her!

And yet...

How often we forget these truths.

How often, in these days of political division, racial tension and economic collapse, do we forget these truths.

I read this in last Tuesday's Washington Post:

"Politics has overheated religion.

At a time when scripture should be at its most profound and when its grace should shine, religion is scalding.

At a time of grave sickness and fear, religion could be a balm for believers and nonbelievers, too.

But instead, it's just another political hand grenade — one that's being hurled with special abandon in Georgia.

Political trolls ravage the Facebook page of Ebenezer Baptist Church because its senior minister, Raphael Warnock, a Democrat, is running for one of Georgia's two U.S. Senate seats, both of which are in play.

His victory could tip the balance of power to his party.

People coming to Ebenezer's virtual home are greeted with a warning and a call to endure:

'You may have noticed an increase in malicious comments on our social media platforms.

Individuals holding hate in their hearts for our Church are coming into our digital spaces and leaving disparaging and often blatantly racist comments, many of which, unfortunately, are directed at our Senior Pastor,' the post reads.

'The next few weeks may be intense, but with God's grace and a little extra vigilance, we will get through.'" 12/8/20.

I have a story for you about another people, in another time, facing many of the same challenges as we do.

It's a story of those who discovered how to breathe new life into the truths we know in our heart of hearts to be true.

It's "about a monastery that is going through hard times.

The monks don't talk with one another, and frankly, they don't even like each other.

No new monks come seeking admission.

The townsfolk no longer journey to the monastery seeking spiritual advice or comfort.

Now, in the woods that surround the monastery, a rabbi lives in a small hut.

Occasionally, the monks see the rabbi walking in those woods, and, almost hypnotically, they say to one another:

'The rabbi walks in the woods.'

The abbot is greatly distraught by the decline of the monastery.

He prays and ponders over the situation and takes to task the mood and behavior of the monks.

Nothing changes.

One day he sees the rabbi walking in the woods and decides to ask for his advice.

He walks up behind the rabbi.

The rabbi turns.

And as the abbot and rabbi face one another, both men begin to weep.

The sorrow of the situation affects them each deeply.

The abbot knows he doesn't have to explain the decline of the monastery.

He merely asks,

'Can you give me some direction so the monastery will thrive again.'

The rabbi says:

'One of you – is the Messiah.'

Then he turns and continues his walk in the woods.

The monks ask the abbot: 'What did the rabbi say?'

The abbot replies slowly, almost incredulously.

He said, 'one of us is the Messiah.'

The monks begin talking with one another.

'One of us?'

'Which one?'

'Is it Brother John?'

'Or is it perhaps Brother Andrew?'

'Could it even be the abbot?'

Slowly things begin to change around the monastery.

The monks begin to look for the Messiah in each other.

To hear in each other's words, the Messiah's voice.

Soon, new, younger monks join up.

And the townspeople return to the monastery for spiritual comfort and wisdom." J. Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels*, 32, modified.

As the poet says:

How
Do I
Listen to others?
As if everyone were my Master
Speaking to me
His
Cherished
Last
Words.

And I wonder, if we few gathered here, and we few hundred gathered virtually through the Internet, might make it our Advent pledge to join with these monks from our story, to join with the poet, and try to see in every person we meet, the Messiah.

Perhaps if we learn to listen to one another, with profound respect, love and anticipation, even to those among us who say hideous things, we, like the abbot, might discover an unexpected transformation unfolding right before our eyes.

God's Spirit is alive today.

If we will trust that truth, and see God's Spirit in every person, perhaps we too can take up the the great commission of our faith:

Bringing good news to the oppressed.

Binding up the brokenhearted.

Proclaiming liberty to the captives, and release to prisoners; as we proclaim, boldly, and without shame, the year of the LORD's favor!

+amen