

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“The Spirit in You: Power”

Dr. Jay Howell

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In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And God said, “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters.” So God made the dome and separated the waters that were under the dome from the waters that were above the dome. And it was so. God called the dome Sky. And there was evening and there was morning, the second day.

And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear.” And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were gathered together he called Seas. And God saw that it was good.

Genesis 1:1-10

We continue today our series “The Spirit in You” which is all about, you could probably guess, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of God. When Pastor Rachel outlined this series for us a year ago when we were planning it, we had no idea what kind of a chord it was going to strike, but I’ve been encouraged by how many of you have reached out since we started two weeks ago, because it affirms at least what we sensed when this series was coming together: that we—and by we I mean a lot of Christians in the United States, but definitely in the Presbyterian tradition—we have tragically neglected how we seek and how we worship the Spirit of God. Comments some of you have shared have been to the tune of, “I can’t remember when I’ve actually sat and thought about what it meant for God to be this Spirit *with* us,” or “Honestly I never really knew what to think about the Holy Spirit but it got to the point I was afraid to ask.” If this is the boat you’re in, I can’t promise we’ll cover every single thing about the Holy Spirit or answer every question you have, but we will continue to do is drop in at various points in Scripture to see how the Bible testifies to the Spirit’s work within us and through us.

A lot of emphasis on the Spirit tends to focus on the Spirit’s arrival to the church, a gift to Christ’s followers, a gift to the faithful—that was what Rachel shared about last Sunday—and that’s for good reason, because that’s when the Spirit came in power into the life of the church, the day of Pentecost it’s called, and we’ll talk more about that in a few weeks. Things were different after that point. But when so

much focus gets put on the Spirit's arrival in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago, we can sometimes slip into thinking that the Spirit's work started then. But that's not the case.

So today, we're going to go to the very beginning, and we'll see that the Spirit of God has been up to something for a very, very long time. Let's go to God's Word.

[Read passage.]

Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

My guess is some of you have read or heard this passage before. Even if you haven't read much of Scripture at all—or even if you've never opened up a Bible you still might be half-familiar with the premise of it—if you ever feel led to open up a Bible on a whim and just turn to page one, this is what you would see: “In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...” This is where it starts, the account of creation. Before everything got messed up, this was God's creation of the world. Into the void and the darkness, God said “Let there be light,” and then boom! I strain to even imagine it, but this cosmic switch goes off and there was light, and God separates the light from the darkness, creates day and night, and it was good. And then separates the heavens from the deep, and then gathers the waters together and dry land appears, and it was good. And that's just as far as we read today, but you get the gist. God *spoke*, and it was so.

Now most of the time if you come to this passage, most attention gets put on that “Let there be light!” or maybe a bit later on when God makes humanity in his image, or maybe a bit after that when God rests on the seventh day. But you know what often gets overlooked? The Spirit of God, at work in creation.

Now you might be thinking, “Now preacher, I didn't hear anything about any spirit when you read this passage. Usually I half-tune you out anyway, but this time I was paying attention, and it didn't say anything about a spirit in all that about ‘Let there be light’ and the waters and the land and all that.” And that's fair. It's easy to miss. When it's all said and done, that might be the point: that it's easy to miss at first glance. But look closer, and see the power of the Spirit at work.

Common misconception is that the way Genesis describes creation is that there was nothing, and then “Let there be light,” and boom, then everything came about after that. But that's not exactly right. But that's not exactly right because, clearly from what even these very early verses tell us, there was something around before that cosmic light switch. There was the earth, in a manner of speaking. It was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep of the waters. Begs the question, well then who made the void, who made the waters. If there was something, then where did that something come from? That's another sermon for another day. But over that something, over that void, that darkness, over what I imagine to be this violent, churning chaos of the depths, there was a power already at work, even before “Let there be light.”

In v. 2, it says, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.” You might think, “Okay, preacher, still not getting it.” But then some of you may be looking at different translations that already

give away the punchline. In a quirk of vocabulary in both Hebrew and Greek, the word we translate as “breath” or “wind” is just as easily rendered as “spirit,” meaning, if you’re reading through your Bible, and you see the word “breath” in there, it’s the same Hebrew word as might be used elsewhere but is translated “spirit,” or elsewhere as “wind.” And that’s the case in both Hebrew and in Greek, oddly enough, but the point is, when we read this second verse, the second verse in Scripture, and we see it saying, “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters,” it could just as easily say, “The Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.” There in just the second verse of the whole Bible, the Spirit of God is active and at work. The Spirit wasn’t just some Plan B alternative brought into the game later on, but rather is an inseparable part of how God has always worked in creation.

Doing what exactly? Well, it’s hard to say. “[Sweeping] over the face of the waters” apparently, but what does that mean? Some Bibles say “hovered” over the waters, others just “moved” over the waters, and even “shook” over the waters could be appropriate there. But what does that mean?

When I was younger, I used to do some work for a ministry building basic housing in Mexico. A simple home, and the first day of the short build was always on the foundation and the concrete slab. So, you get to the site and you see these huge piles of sand and gravel and bags of cement. The ministry didn’t have cement mixers, so it was all by hand. Out come the shovels, mixing the sand and the gravel and the cement with the right ratio of water in these big plastic tubs, and when it was at the right consistency, dumping the tubs in the frame for the foundation.

But of course, this was going to be the floor of the house, so you had to tamp and smooth it, and this is how we used to do it. You see once we would pour out the concrete, the mixed sand and gravel and cement, even when we would spread out flat, some of the rocks from the gravel would still be at the surface, and that wasn’t good to just leave them like that because then the floor wouldn’t be smooth, and these rocks could just pop out over time if you caught them on your shoe. So what we did was, while the concrete was still wet, take a 2x4, lay it out across the floor so that it would be resting on the frame on either side, then slowly move it back and forth to spread out any excess concrete. But to get the rocks away from the surface, we had to tamp it, and that wasn’t quite so peaceful. One person would hold their end of the 2x4 down, while the other took their end, raised it into the air, and slammed it down onto their side of the frame, over and over, then switching back and forth from one side to the next, moving the 2x4 gradually throughout the whole floor. And what would happen is every time the 2x4 would come down onto the floor, the rocks at the surface would slowly be pushed downward, away from the floor’s surface.

Then, folks would come behind that with trowels, gently skimming over the surface, and after all of that tamping and that smoothing, you end up with a nice smooth floor.

And that, I believe, is something like what the Spirit of God was doing hovering, sweeping, moving, shaking over the face of the waters. Common misconception about the Holy Spirit is that he’s all comfort and assurance. A gentle nudge here, a whisper in your ear there. But over and over in Scripture he’s not just described as this guiding hand but as this powerful, unmistakable, even terrifying force. On the Day of Pentecost, the Spirit’s arrival wasn’t marked by the gentle glow of sunlight and an angelic choir singing in the background; it was the sound of a violent, rushing wind. Even elsewhere in the Old

Testament, when the Israelites were at the Red Sea, it was the wind, the Spirit of God, that pushed back and held back the waters so that Israel could walk across.

So here, even at the beginning of things, when we hear of the Spirit's moving, hovering, over the face of the waters, we can imagine not just a gentle breeze, but also hurricane force gusts, doing one thing: subduing the void, bringing order, creation, and goodness where there was chaos. That's the Spirit's work, the Spirit's power: to subdue the chaotic churn of the world and bring about something good. Even before there was light, the Spirit was at work, bringing about something good.

And sometimes it may not have always been a peaceful, tranquil process. But it's good. I mean if you were to have looked out upon the void, upon the darkness, upon the chaotic churn before God said "Let there be light," would you have thought, this would be a good place to set up shop? No. You probably would've thought, there's just no way. No way something good could come out of this. But look closer, and maybe you'd have seen the Spirit's work.

We can probably think the same about our own lives, our own worlds, the creation we live in now. We can look at it, we can look out upon the churn of everything happening, we can see the disorder in creation, of even while the pandemic seems to be waning here it still in the middle of a fourth surge worse than the rest of them in India, Turkey, and South America. We can see within our own city the pain of a single school community traumatized by five shootings. We can see within our households the anxiety, the burdens of sustaining relationships, renewing friendships, repairing marriages, the sources of pain that light hasn't shown upon yet. We can see within ourselves, the scars of wounds long ago, or the hurt from wounds more recent than that, the insecurities, the uncertainties, the guilt, the brokenness. We can look at all of it and think, there's just no way. No way something good could come out of this.

But look closer, and maybe you'll see the Spirit's work, the Spirit's power. It's not always a peaceful, tranquil thing, but the Spirit is at work, even when we can't see it, even when we can't fathom how anything could be done, even when we'd rather things just be left alone, bringing about something good, even before the light comes.

Last week, our own Rosemary Gilliam shared with Rachel, Mark, and myself a poem by Francis Drake. Francis Drake, you might know, was a British sea captain and explorer, so of course it's all about the sea and the wind, and its title is "Disturb Us, Lord." Part of it reads, "Disturb us, Lord, to dare more boldly, To venture on wider seas where storms will show Your mastery; Where losing sight of land, we shall find the stars. We ask You to push back the horizons of our hopes; And to push into the future in strength, courage, hope, and love." And though in general it's about complacency, asking God to lead into greater courage, I hear an echo at least of the Spirit's work. For the Spirit's power is not always peaceful, not always tranquil, but it is always at work, bringing about something good.

So perhaps we might say, "Disturb us, Holy Spirit, that in your power we might see the goodness you are bringing forth."

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.