

Creation: Old and New
May 31, 2015

Scripture readings:

Genesis 2:4b-8: In the day that the LORD God made the earth and the heavens, 5 when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up – for the LORD God had not yet caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground; 6 but a mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground – 7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. 8 And the LORD God planted a garden in Eden, in the East; and there he put the man whom he had formed. (RSV)

John 20:19: On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” (RSV)

May God bless the hearing of his holy word. Amen.

Friday morning, I received a phone call from Reverend Zanicky – make that Reverend Shawn Zanicky. She told me about Reverend Bob’s being in the hospital, and asked if I would substitute for him today. She was simultaneously on another phone, apparently receiving word concerning his condition, which at the time was still uncertain. I answered yes, I would. So, here I am. My mother told me long ago what her father, a Presbyterian missionary in the Congo for 43 years, said to her. He said, “If anyone asks you to speak, say ‘Yes.’” My mother always said “Yes,” not only to invitations to speak, but also to travel and visit. Indeed, she even came and spoke here, about 15 years ago. So, with that instruction and example, I could say no other than “Yes.” Because Reverend Zanicky had already asked me to substitute later in June, I had already been meditating on a topic for a message. So, today you are getting that message three weeks early!

Our first scripture, from Genesis, addresses a question that mankind has had from distant antiquity: What are we, and why are we here? The answer from the Hebrew scripture is that we are part of God’s intentional creation, an essential and central part of it. Where there had been a void, God forms, and breathes life into, a human being, a man we have come to know as “Adam,” which simply means “man”. As we also have from Genesis:

Genesis 1:27: So God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (RSV)

I'd like to focus on one particular verse from our scripture:

Genesis 2:7 then the LORD God formed man from the dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. (RSV)

The Hebrew word for “formed” is used also for a potter molding clay. So, the image one gets is of God molding this inanimate lump from clay taken from the ground, then breathing life into it. The word for “breath”, the Hebrew word “ruah”, also means “spirit” and “wind”. This miracle of life, the difference between an inert mass and a living, breathing person, is the spirit, the breath, that God puts into the man. This miracle of life, the intelligent, creative, and vital form of life that we know as human beings, is spoken of as being “in the image of God.”

Consider for a moment how mysterious the wind was to the ancients. It can't be seen, but it has great force. The miracle of life, the breath or spirit that characterized living things, was like that: invisible, mysterious, and awe inspiring.

That is still true. We as modern humanity understand some things better. Meteorologists now have the Navier-Stokes equations that allow us to understand fluid flow: the wind. That's why weather prediction has been perfected. What? It hasn't? Oh, my! But we know the equations! Isn't that all we need? Obviously not! It seems some things are more complicated than that! We also have many insights into the way living organisms work, which the ancients lacked. But ultimately, we still don't understand the underlying fabric of the universe. Astronomers puzzle over stuff called “dark matter” and “dark energy” which they believe make up most of the universe, but have no idea what it is. We still don't understand the mind: how we reason or how memories are structured. We still don't understand the miracle of the creation of the Universe. As Christians, it is our belief that all of this is of, and from, God. Our breath and our spirit as well.

In our second scripture reading, from the Gospel of John, we see Jesus on the evening of the day of resurrection, Easter. The disciples had heard about the empty tomb. But they did not yet know what it means. They have gathered together behind locked doors. Then Jesus unexpectedly appears in their midst. Luke's gospel mentions how much this frightened them. Jesus says, “Peace be with you.” He shows them the wounds, and they are convinced it is indeed him, risen and alive. Sadness and fear is turned into rejoicing.

Then Jesus says, **“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”**

There is that word “breath” again. Jesus breathes on them, just as God breathes life into Adam in the Genesis story. Jesus explains that what he has breathed into them is something new to them, the Holy Spirit. The New Testament was written in Greek. So this isn't the Hebrew word, but the Greek word “pneumos” which also means both “breath” and “spirit.” It's the root for our word “pneumatic.” The disciples have had breathed into them a new life, a new way of being. A way that comes with a commission: **“As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.”** So, what does this mean?

It's important that we consider the context of this reading. It comes from the Gospel of John. The entire Johannine literature, which includes the Gospel, three epistles, and the Revelation, are all permeated with an emphasis on God's love. Here are two examples that you have probably heard many times.

John 3:16-17: For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. (RSV)

I John 4: 7-10: Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (NRSV)

John revisits this theme of God's love over and over, from different perspectives, in different stories, and with different words. When Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into the disciples after the Resurrection, he is fulfilling the promise that John records Jesus as giving his disciples a few days earlier, at the last Supper:

John 14: 18-21: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you. Yet a little while, and the world will see me no more, but you will see me; because I live, you will live also. In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him." (RSV)

This promise has just been fulfilled. But, there is more. And, this is really where I'd like to focus some attention. Returning to our scripture reading, Jesus says,

"Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Did you hear that? It sounds like Jesus has just given his disciples the power to forgive or to refuse forgiveness of sins. This verse 23 has been called "very controversial," for good reason. It's puzzling. Yet, it comes as a piece, in the same quotation even, with the giving of the Holy Spirit.

Remember, in antiquity, the gospels were copied by hand, so the gospel writers tended to omit anything they thought of lesser importance. For example, Mark, the first gospel to be written, leaves out all of the infancy material. It was more important to be able to make more copies quickly, so that as many people as possible could hear the essentials of the good news, the gospel. John is writing much later, near the end of the first century. The other gospels are

already in circulation. He can afford to include these words, which other gospels omit, but he thought was important.

One reason this is important is that the Church, both in antiquity and now, understands the scriptures applied to the disciples as applicable also to us in our day. Jesus not only breathes the Holy Spirit into those disciples 2000 years ago, but into us today. But what about this bit about forgiveness of sins, which is here directly connected to the gift of the Holy Spirit? What does it mean for us? I'd like to explore that a bit, and I believe you will find this interesting and edifying.

There is a passage nearly parallel in the Gospel of Matthew which helps shed some light on the question. In Mathew 16, Jesus has been asking his disciples who people were saying that he was.

Matthew 16: 15-19: “He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16 Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” 17 And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (RSV)

The words “bind” and “loose” have specific technical meanings in Jewish law. Here’s an example that has to do with the “heave-offering” of agricultural produce given to support the priests. A “seah” is a unit of measure, about 7 liters. I’m quoting from the Interpreter’s Bible. “In rabbinical language ‘to bind’ and ‘to loose’ is to declare certain actions forbidden or permitted. e.g., Terumoth 5:4., ‘if one seah of unclean heave-offering falls into a hundred seahs of clean, the (rabbinic) School of Shammai bind [forbid] the entire lot, but the School of Hillel loose [permit] it.’ (*Interpreter’s Bible*, 1951, Abingdon Press, v. 7, p453.)

A rabbi was a scholar who had studied the Law. He was honored with the right to interpret it and to make judgments about what was “bound” and would be considered a sin if done, and what was “loosed” or “unbound” and allowed as not sinful. In this quotation, concerning how much of an impure offering contaminates a larger volume, we see that sometimes various rabbis differed in their rulings.

Jesus is telling Peter that he will receive this same authority, the authority that a rabbi acquires only after years of study and recognition by his peers. Peter, you recall, was a fisherman. Not a student of the Law. How could Peter be trusted to make such decisions?

Our reading from the Gospel of John answers, and expands on, this. Peter, and the other disciples, will have this ability because the Holy Spirit will be in them. Furthermore, in our reading from John, Jesus speaks not of just binding and loosing interpretations of what “would be” a sin, but of sins themselves.

Jesus himself has done just that. To the paralyzed man in Mark 3, Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven.” Jesus never directly says “I forgive your sins.” It is Jesus being one with the Father that allows forgiveness to be declared.

Here’s what Jesus is saying: It’s not that the believer as a human being has the power of forgiveness of sins himself. The spirit-filled believer will be able to discern right and wrong in a new way: wrongs that have received God’s forgiveness, and sins that remain unforgiven. How much more wonderful is this than the ordinary knowledge of good and evil that Adam and Eve received from eating that forbidden fruit!

In Matthew Jesus is speaking specifically to Peter. In the Gospel of John, Jesus’s words are given to his disciples generally. The disciples then, and believers now, when filled with the Holy Spirit, can discern issues of right and wrong, sin and forgiveness. I like how the Biblical scholar and writer William Barclay explains it. “No man can forgive any other man’s sins. But it is the great privilege of the Church to convey the message of God’s forgiveness to men. . . . The sentence [that is, John 22:23] lays down the duty of the Church to convey forgiveness to the penitent in heart and warn the impenitent that they are forfeiting the mercy of God.” Indeed, we have just acted on this power this morning, as we said together, “In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.”

What Jesus has ushered in is a new state of being. Just as Adam becomes a living, breathing, and thinking man when God breathes life into him, Jesus’s followers become alive in a new sense, filled with God’s spirit and God’s love. In John 10:10b, Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.”

Now, we don’t use this kind of language in our every-day lives. But, God promises, in Jesus, to be with us, as we live in the world, and meet people who desperately need this new way of being. If it’s important for you to do or say something particular, I believe God will let you know it. Actions, how you live your life, speak louder than words. Understand that God can bless even our mistakes, and turn them to His good purposes.

I, myself, depend on that help from the Spirit. Did you notice the prayer after the scripture was read? I prayed, “May God bless the hearing of His holy word.” You hear that often; maybe you don’t think about it. But I depend very much on that blessing. After all, who am I to bring a message to you on Sunday morning? I’m not an ordained minister. I’m not a Bible scholar. I don’t know Hebrew or Greek. I don’t have any formal training for what I’m doing right now. If I had to depend on my own abilities, I couldn’t, and shouldn’t, be up here speaking to you now. But, I can count on God to bless the hearing of his Word, and make that word come alive in the lives of those who hear it. As the apostle Paul describes it, God has entrusted his precious message to us, who are as fragile clay jars.

So, who in your world needs the message of grace? Who do you know who cannot imagine themselves as forgiven for some wrong they have done? We as Christians are the inheritors of the blessings Jesus passes on to his disciples. We hear the message of God’s love. We hear his promise to be with us in spirit, the promise of understanding. We accept a mission to go into the world, as Jesus came for the disciples, and comes in spirit for us. Jesus invites us all

to commit to a life filled with God's love, love overflowing to others. He asks us to live out a message that says that forgiveness is freely available, a message that the material is less important than the spiritual. For, the material will ultimately pass away.

John's words in the Gospel and the epistles tell us of God's ultimate purpose, for us to be His children in a New Creation beyond this life. In the Revelation, John writes, from his vision, Jesus's words. Jesus is beckoning from Heaven an invitation open to all. The gift of life, a new life suited for a new creation, is found in Jesus and his Bride, the church. Hear Jesus's words:

Rev 22:17 "The Spirit and the bride say, "Come." And let everyone who hears, say "Come." Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift." (NRSV)

Amen.