

“The Spirit Moves”

Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 2:1-4; 12-21

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost – All Saints Day – November 1, 2009

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

Copyright: 2009, I. Peden

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

The 2009 Fall preaching series on the subject of the Holy Spirit has been punctuated by two very important events: the Finch Preaching Mission two Sundays ago, and our observance of Children’s Sabbath last Sunday. During this time God’s spirit moved among us through worship, music, song, fellowship, and through the leadership of God’s servants like Dr. Clift Black, Dr. Lillie Jones, and the children of Memorial.

Today is All Saints Day. It is also the start of November which is stewardship month at Memorial. It is time for all God’s saints to begin to consider how God’s spirit is moving us to respond to the challenge of meeting the 2010 budget by tithing our time, talents, and treasure as good stewards of all God has entrusted to us. Today also puts us back on track with this series that presents lessons about the Holy Spirit.

Our topic today is *The Spirit Moves*. My first two sermons in this series have in a sense already described ways that the Holy Spirit moves. I hope that all the sermons in this series will clarify that God’s spirit moves and is known in a personal way. In the sermon entitled *The Spirit Assures* I discussed the personal dimension of the Holy Spirit’s movement in our lives by probing the meaning of the assuring work of God’s spirit: that the Holy Spirit assures us ...bears witness with our spirit ...that we are children of God. In other words, it is the Holy Spirit’s responsibility to let us know that God loves us and that we belong to God for all time and eternity.

In the second sermon in this series entitled *The Spirit Satisfies*, I invited you to consider how God’s spirit satisfies our intense longing for God. I spoke about our instinctive thirst for a satisfying spiritual life, our need to respond to the Holy Spirit individually, and our recognition that God’s spirit is infectious ...that the Living Water we receive will flow out from our lives to others through loving, caring relationships with all people. Now we continue to explore how the Holy Spirit moves within us and around us.

The Old Testament reading of the creation story in Genesis, chapter 1, records how the

“Spirit of God was moving (or brooding) over the face of the waters (or the deep). And God said, ‘Let there be light;’ and there was light.” In the next chapter, Genesis 2, it is also no accident when God takes a lump of clay, or dirt, or dust from the ground and breathes into it and creates living beings. God calls them “Adam,” which translated from Hebrew in its broad sense means “humankind.”

It is important to note that the key to understanding the movement of God’s spirit is found in the creation story. James Weldon Johnson, the author of the famous hymn *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, wrote a book in 1927 entitled *God’s Trombones*. It is a book of African-American folk poems ... a book in which Johnson took old African-American sermons and fashioned them into poems. In the first poem entitled *The Creation* Johnson says: “And God stepped out on space, and he looked around and said, ‘I’m lonely - I’ll make me a world!’” This is certainly not what the story in Genesis tells us, but the poetic can express what the prosaic cannot. We call it “poetic license.” When it comes to something as profound as the creation of the universe (or many universes) I am inclined to think that the inner logic of poetry is necessary for accessing the deep things of God. An old African-American preacher got hold of the inner spiritual logic of God when he said, “And God stepped out on space, and he looked around and said, ‘I’m lonely - I’ll make me a world!’”

The story in Genesis reminds us that before God created ... before God stepped out on space to create a world ... “the earth was without form and void.” That’s a description of nothing! Until God’s spirit moved to create something, there was nothing except God. Let’s remember that it is not God’s loneliness at issue in creation. God is God ... God is *a Se* – a Latin phrase used in theology that literally means “God is *to God’s Self*” – that is, God is whole and complete and fulfilled in God’s self. God is the root, the source, the depth, and the ground of all that is.

Then something begins happening: God’s spirit begins moving about. If God’s spirit had *not* started to move, I guess we would not be here! God’s spirit, literally God’s “breath” – in Hebrew, God’s *ruach* – begins moving in creative ways. One might call the Holy Spirit the moving agent of creation. Without God’s spirit moving over the deep and dark nothingness there would be no universe, no natural order, no humankind, and no you and no

me! The spirit of God moved over the face of the deep when God stepped out on space and said: “I’ll make me a world!”

Therefore, let us affirm today that the movement of God’s spirit is the source of our life ...the source of the life of every creature. In other words, we owe our very existence, our lives – our bodies, minds, and souls – to the activity, the movement, of God’s spirit in the awesome act of creation. In is just my opinion, as I said earlier, that in order to understand the person and work of the Holy Spirit is, we need to understand the doctrine of creation.

Following this work of creation the Holy Spirit continues to move in everything that breathes. In Old Testament times the spirit of God also singles out and moves in the lives of individuals ...patriarchs, judges, priests, kings and prophets ...enabling them to perform feats that they otherwise would not have the strength to achieve.

In addition to creation there was a second and very important occasion when the spirit of God moved: it was the Day of Pentecost. When the spirit of God moved at Pentecost it was like a mighty, rushing wind blowing through the open doors and windows of the house where the disciples sat huddled in fear and uncertainty. When the spirit of God moved it was like a mysterious light filling that house and settling upon the heads of each disciple. Surely the presence of the Lord was in that place! In fact, God’s presence was overpowering. The disciples were overawed. It was one of those life-changing experiences.

From that moment forward the faith of Christ’s first disciples was so evident; from that moment on they were contagious Christians, and others – travelers to Jerusalem from all over the region – were infected by the disciples’ faith in Jesus. In a moment – when the Holy Spirit moved, as the prophet Joel foretold – a collection of timid, dysfunctional, doubting individuals were transformed into a powerful, unified, body of believers. In one explosive instant ...when God’s spirit moved ...a new movement began ... a Jesus movement ... and the New Testament church was born.

This is God’s world where God’s spirit is moving through the church. The Holy Spirit is God’s agent in mission, and the church – comprised of all the saints, including us in Thomasville ...the church is called to be the Holy Spirit’s partner in this exciting mission calling all people to *Follow Christ; Make Disciples; Transform the World*. The Holy Spirit

partners with the church to proclaim that in Christ we may all become new creatures as we respond to Jesus as Savior and Lord. That is the priority of the Holy Spirit right now. I will have more to say about that in another sermon in a couple of Sundays.

We all need to feel assured that we belong to God ...that is the Holy Spirit's work. Our deep longing for God needs to be satisfied by the Living Water ...that is also the Holy Spirit's work. But unless we allow God's spirit to bond us together as a crew of Christ's disciples – as the eleven disciples in that upper room in Jerusalem were bonded together – and unless we are ready to move forward together in a Spirit-driven mission, then the Holy Spirit's assuring and satisfying work is all in vain. The work of the Holy Spirit in an individual's life is not an end in itself. Such personal work – while it is important – is secondary to the Holy Spirit's primary purpose of propelling the church of Jesus Christ into a worldwide mission.

There is no need to invoke the Holy Spirit through some special prayer formula, or a style of worship that whips up everyone's emotions in order to create some kind of spiritual frenzy, because the Holy Spirit moves where it wills. God's spirit is like the wind, Jesus said "that blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it is going." God's spirit could be moving into your mind today ...or moving into my attitudes towards people who are different from me ...or moving into your circumstances to make something beautiful out of the mess you find yourself in ...or moving into our consciences to convict us about how we are using our money ...or moving into our hearts to stir us to compassion to do something more about the needs of the poor, or the aging, or single parents, or the hungry, or the imprisoned, or those caught in the grip of HIV/AIDS, or at-risk youth.

So today's lesson about God's spirit is quite simple and clear: *The Holy Spirit moves!* In the beginning, unless the Holy Spirit moved creatively over the face of the deep, there would be *nothing*. In the here-and-now, unless the church allows the Holy Spirit to move in its midst, there, too, would be *nothing* – apart from some rituals, programs, actions, funds, and – oh, yes – some buildings! There may be some form of religion, but there would be no power. However, when God's people – usually one individual at a time or in some unusual historic instances of revival, as a whole company of Christian believers in one place at one

time – are open to the movement of God’s spirit, great and mighty things can and do begin to happen.

Let me close with a true story from the pages of my own ministry experience. It is a story about Ben and Ben. Yes, two Bens! It is around mid-year in 1980 in Johannesburg South. I was serving a 700 member congregation called Mondeor Methodist Church. This story seems to illustrate both the way God’s spirit can move in the lives of God’s people and the way the Holy Spirit moves us all to be good and generous stewards of the resources with which we have been entrusted.

[TELL THE STORY BRIEFLY!]

Listen to the wind, my brothers and sisters in Christ! Listen to the wind! God’s spirit surrounds us totally and completely, and when God’s spirit moves we know it as surely as know the wind that sometimes comes with great force and power in the form of a hurricane, or the wind that comes as a soft, refreshing breeze that gently blows the leaves on the trees. The Holy Spirit is no stranger in our midst; in fact, God’s spirit is moving in a mysterious way through this room where we are gathered right now or in the place where you are listening to your radio. Today the Holy Spirit moves quietly and gently; today the Holy Spirit moves with much noise, great strength, and mighty power. Let us listen to the wind, and as we listen, let us ask ourselves: “What is the Holy Spirit moving *us* to do, or say, or change, or give, or sacrifice that will advance God’s kingdom?”

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