

Sermon for Sunday, May 22, 2016
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today
is the first Sunday
after Pentecost,
the Sunday when, by tradition,
we remember God
in all God's fullness,
God the holy
Trinity,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

And you might justifiably wonder
why our gospel reading for today
was chosen. Especially since it doesn't sound a whole lot different
from the gospel readings we've had
the last few weeks,
all of them chosen
from that last night before Jesus died,
when he taught his disciples
what he thought
they most needed to know.

Last week, and two weeks before,
we heard Jesus say,

"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you."

Sound familiar?

Here's how Jesus says it in this week's gospel:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth."

So you might reasonably think
that the lectionary people
got confused,
forgot about Trinity Sunday
and gave us another reading for Pentecost,
another reading

about the Holy Spirit.

But what if we think about it another way.

What if we think about
why of all of Jesus' conversation
the night before he died,
the writer of this gospel
chose to include
so much of what Jesus said
about the Spirit?

Remember

that the gospel of John ends this way:

“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.”

So much
to choose from,
so much to write down
And of all of it,
the gospel writer
chose to include this,
Jesus
talking about
the Spirit.

Why do you think that is?

I suspect

it's because one of the biggest questions

for the early church was

who is God?

And how does Jesus fit into the picture?

And his spirit?

How should we think of this God whom we worship?

Because before Jesus

it was easy.

There was God.
God known
in many ways:
as creator, as lord, as rock, as lion,
as fortress, as wisdom, as peace.
But still the same.
God.

And then came Jesus,
and an angel announced him
as “God with us”
and he seemed to have
an unusually close relationship with God.
and claimed to be
the son of God.

One of the accusations made against Jesus
time and time again,
the accusation
that eventually led to his death,
the accusation was
that he claimed
to be God.
And that, for the Jewish people,
that
was blasphemy.

They could have dealt with it
if he had just claimed to be a prophet.
Yes, he healed people,
Yes, he taught,
Yes, he raised Lazarus from the dead.
But all of those
were things that prophets had done in the past.

But then Jesus did something else,
something no prophet
had ever done.
He told people
that their sins were forgiven.

And that
was something
that only God
could do.

Either Jesus
was a blasphemer,
or he was God.

And when in the upper room,
shown the marks in Jesus' hands and side,
Thomas blurted out,
"My Lord and my God!"
he was voicing the conclusion they had all reached.
Jesus,
somehow,
was God.

And because he talked so intimately with God,
and taught them
to call God "Abba", Dad,
they came to understand God
as Father and Son.

But then Pentecost happened.
A great wind blew
and something that looked like flames came on them,
and they began to preach about Jesus in different languages,
and they felt, they knew,
that it was God among them.
Especially when it didn't end then,
and found themselves
able to find words to speak
when they were confronted by the authorities,
and they prayed
and people were healed,
and they slowly began to understand more and more
of what Jesus had taught them.
And they thought back
to Jesus' words,

“remember how
 he talked about his spirit?”
 and they began to understand that God
 was not just one,
 nor even two,
 but three,
 Abba,
 Jesus,
 Spirit.

And eventually that became codified in our Creed.
 We believe in one God.
 One God,
 but somehow three.
 The Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,
 of all that is, seen and unseen.
 The Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
 eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true
 God, begotten, not made,
 of one Being with the Father.
 And the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 three, and one.
 All three
 are present
 in our reading today from the gospel according to John,
 when Jesus says,
 “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and
 declare it to you.”
 And if you look at the previous sentences, it’s clear
 that the “he” of the last sentence
 is not the Father but the Spirit.
 So it now reads, “All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that the Spirit will
 take what is mine and declare it to you.”
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But of the three, it’s the Holy Spirit
 that gives us the most trouble,

the Holy Spirit
that in most churches
is almost invisible.

Because the Holy Spirit
is trouble.

We tend to assume
that the Father
is up there in his heaven,
overseeing the world,
there when we call
for particular needs,
but otherwise
at a safe distance.

And Jesus
is up there with him
bringing his humanity
into the realm of God,
a model for us, and the source of forgiveness.

But again,
apart from the times we call
for particular needs,
Jesus stays
at a safe distance as well.

But the Spirit,
the Spirit
isn't up there at all.

The Spirit, as the catechism at the back of our prayer book, on page 852 says,
the Spirit is
"God at work
in the world
and in the Church
even now."

And that makes
for trouble.

Most of the time, we want
a God
who knows his place.

There when we need him,
but leaving us to our own lives
the rest of the time.
But the Holy Spirit
missed that memo.
The Holy Spirit
is at work in the world
and in the church
even now.

And one of the ways the Holy Spirit is at work,
according to Jesus
is guiding us
in truth.

We tend to assume
that when the bible was put together,
that was it.

You just have to look at it, and there the answers to life's questions will be, staring you in the face.

But of course, we know
that it doesn't quite work that way.
Because the bible was written
long ago,
in a different world,
and we have to read it, and tease out its meaning,
and see how through it
God might be speaking to us
today.

And that's the work of the Spirit.

It's like reading a poem by one of the great poets.
You might have read it first in school
because your English teacher
demanded it.
First just looking at the surface,
then digging a little.
And then in college,
you find it on the syllabus again.
What a waste of time.

Except this time,
you discover a little more in the words.
And then, as time passes
you return to it like an old friend,
and with the wisdom of age
hear even more.
Over time
you discover layer
upon layer
of meaning,
things you could never have imagined
when you first read it
in the ninth grade.

That's how the Spirit works,
helping us to understand the truth of Christ and his words
more and more,
uncovering layers,
and depths,
and new levels of meaning,
So that our faith
isn't a historic relic
but living.
It's the Spirit
that guides us,
helping us to know
who God is
in this changing world.
And it's the Spirit
that helps us change too,
that enables us to find new life
as the old world
and old life
crumbles.

And so today,
as we celebrate our God,
Father, Son,
and
Holy Spirit,

I invite you to look and see
where God's spirit
is active in our church
and your life,
ever leading us, ever guiding us,
ever calling us
into new life
and new truth.