

The Holy Spirit: At work in Jesus, and in us.

This morning's reading from Matthew's gospel is the first story that appears in that book. And in it, the author sets the stage for his description of the ministry of Jesus, by establishing the "credentials" of this son of Joseph and Mary.

In these seven verses, Matthew describes the events surrounding the conception and birth of Jesus. He tells us that Mary was a virgin, but that was not the most important point of this story. Matthew describes the turmoil that Joseph went through when he discovered that Mary was pregnant, and how it was resolved, but that was not the most important point of this story. And he tells us of how the name of Jesus was selected and what that name was to mean, but that was not the most important point of this story.

The most important point of Matthew's story is found, first, in verse 18, where we are told that Mary was "found to be with child from the Holy Spirit," and again in verse 20, where the angel says that "the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." Now, what I think Matthew wanted to emphasize, in this story, is the fact that, in the birth of Jesus, the Holy Spirit was at work. And this point is so important to Matthew that he mentions it twice. But what we need to figure out is "Why?" Why is this point so important to Matthew?

Well, if we are to understand what Matthew was trying to say about Jesus, we cannot bring to our reading and interpretation of this passage, any Christian ideas about the Holy Spirit, because Matthew, as a first century Jew, wouldn't have known anything about those. Rather, we must interpret it in the light of the "Jewish" idea of the Holy Spirit, because that was all that Matthew would have known. And, according to Jewish beliefs, the Holy Spirit had at least four definite functions, and I'd like to talk about each briefly.

First, **the Holy Spirit brought God's truth to God's people.** It was the Holy Spirit who told the prophets what to say. It was the Holy Spirit who taught the people of God what to do. In other words, it was the Holy Spirit who brought God's truth to God's people. Therefore, Matthew understood Jesus to be a person who was uniquely empowered to bring God's truth to us. Or, to put it in another way, Jesus is the one person who can tell us what God is really like, and what God wants us to be like. Before Jesus came along, people had only a vague and, often, rather wrong idea about God. But Jesus could say, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." Therefore, in the life and work of Jesus, we see the love, compassion, and mercy of God more than in any other person, place, or thing.

The second thing the Jews believed about the Holy Spirit, was that not only did the Spirit bring God's truth to God's people, but the Spirit also **enabled us to recognize that truth when we see it.** Because people are so often blinded to the truth through ignorance, or by prejudice, or

by vices and passions. But Matthew recognized that, because God's Spirit was at work in Jesus, therefore Jesus was the only one who could open our eyes to the truth.

Third, the Jews especially **connected the Spirit of God with the work of creation**. It was through his Spirit that God performed his creating work. In the book of Genesis, we read how a wind from God moved upon the face of the world, and chaos became ordered. The Psalmist tells us that "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6). Remember, such references to God's breath or wind were almost always references to the Holy Spirit. "The Spirit of God has made me," said Job, "and the breath of the Almighty gives me life" (Job 33:4). In other words, the Spirit is the creator of the world and the giver of life. Therefore, Matthew recognized that, in Jesus, there came into the world, in human form, God's life-giving and creating power. That power, which reduced the primal chaos to order, has come to bring order to the disordered lives of men and women everywhere. That power, which breathed life into that in which there was no life, has come to breathe life into our weaknesses and frustrations. We could put it this way: We are not really alive until Jesus enters into our lives.

Finally, the Jews connected the Spirit, not only with the work of creation, but also **with the work of re-creation**. The prophet Ezekiel, draws a pretty grim picture of a valley of dry bones. But he then describes how the dry bones came alive when Ezekiel heard God say, "I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live" (Ezekiel 37:1-14). When people are spiritually dead, it is the Spirit of God who can awaken them to a new life. So then, Matthew is telling us that, in Jesus, there came into this world the power which can re-create life. He can restore to life the soul which is all but dead. He can revive the ideals which have perished. He can reassert our desire to do good. Jesus, and he alone, can renew us, when our lives have lost all their meaning.

There is much more in this brief passage from Matthew's gospel than the simple facts surrounding the birth of Jesus. The essence of Matthew's story is that, in the birth of Jesus, the Spirit of God was at work as with no other person before.

I didn't take the time to mention all of the functions of the Holy Spirit only so that we could come to a better understanding of the mission and ministry of Jesus. I did so, in order that we might understand that the same Spirit that was operative in Jesus' life, is also operative in our own lives. We too can call upon God's Holy Spirit to fill and strengthen us. We too can be empowered to continue the work that Jesus began.

The same Spirit who brought the truth to the prophets and patriarchs of Israel's history, and who was inspiring the people of the New Testament, is also bringing the truth of God to us, and enabling us to recognize it. But this is not simply for the purpose of elevating us above those around us, but rather so that we can become the agents of truth, bringing God's truth into those places where it does not occur.

The same Spirit which was at work in the beginning, bringing order out of chaos, is at work within us. Like Jesus, we also are the agents of order and of peace. Where there are broken

lives and relationships, where there is need for healing, we are sent, to bring to that situation, God's power to heal and make new.

In this world, we are God's hands and feet; we are to go into the world, into places where the name of God is not known. We are God's mouth and voice; we are to tell people about the good news of what God has done for us. We are God's arms and hands; we are to help raise people up when they are down, and embrace them when they are lonely and afraid.

If all this sounds rather intimidating to you, well, it is for me as well. But I have always found it comforting and encouraging to know that, just as God's Spirit was present with Jesus, giving him strength to do the things he was called to do, God's Spirit will be with us as well. Therefore, let us go out into the world, not in fear and anxiety because *our* resources are so few, but rather let us go filled with joy and peace because God's resources are so great. Amen.