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On Setting Up A Sail

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Text: John 3:1-8

It is with the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, that many Christians have most trouble. One man complained, "The Father and the Son I know, but who is this Holy Bird?" He meant the Holy Spirit of whom one of the most powerful symbols is that of a dove descending.

I must tell you, though, that the Holy Ghost is my most immediate experience of God. The Spirit's presence, though mysterious and inexhaustible, is at the same time God most readily recognized and most intimately revealed. I believe this to be true of most of us, though we may not recognize it to be true; for all our experience of God is experience of the Spirit. God is Spirit. The trouble is that God's spirit is, if anything, "too instant to be known".

Our experience of the Spirit is like wearing glasses. The only time we really look at them is when we are looking for them. Glasses are not to be seen, they are to be seen through. They are fulfilling their function best when we do not notice them. We examine them only to remove the specks and smears that draw attention to the glasses themselves instead of allowing us to see other things. Sitting comfortably on our nose, when we are sitting comfortably in our chair, we are not aware of them. Their best work is done when we can see clearly the book we are reading, or the film we are watching. We don't see our glasses, but when we wear them we see!

The Holy Spirit is like that. To look for the Holy Spirit and complain that we can't find the Spirit is like complaining

that one can't find one's glasses, having forgotten that one is already wearing them. The presence of the Holy Spirit is the power of our seeing. It is by the Spirit that we seek the Spirit.

Yet it is useful at times to look at the things by which we see to recognize how useful they are and what they do for us. It is helpful now and then not only to perceive, but to understand our perceiving. So let me mention three qualities of the Holy Spirit in three words. Each will declare one aspect of the Spirit's nature and enable us to recognize and celebrate the Spirit's presence.

1. The first word is Intimacy.

One of the meanings of the Hebrew word for spirit is "breath". Notice that if you take a deep breath, the air is drawn deeply into your lungs, until it fills you. You feel it doing so. You swell with it. Your chest rises as you breathe it in, and you know that from your lungs it moves its energy to every cell of your body bringing life and vitality with it. So important is our breath that if we were to miss even a few, we should perish. We breathe, and the life-giving breath becomes the power of our breathing and thinking and doing.

The Spirit is like that. When we think of the other Persons of the Holy Trinity, we do not doubt their reality, but it is a reality that addresses us and is addressed by us. We think of God the Father as the One who created us, to whom we speak our prayers, offer our praise; the One who is above us to whom we lift up our hearts. When we speak of the Son, we think of the One who came to dwell among us, full of grace and truth; who promised to be with us always, wedding himself to our humanity and identifying himself with us for ever. But is that the deepest degree of intimacy with God we may enjoy? What if God were to dwell, not only above us and with us, but within us? What if God were to become the very nerve of our character, the power of our perception, the depth of our wisdom, the motion by which we seek him, the shaper of our attitudes from within? What if we could be invaded by God, pervaded by God, had God's dear presence within as we have breath in our lungs, the power of our seeing and feeling? But that is precisely what God does. The Holy Spirit is God within us, hardly to be distinguished, at times, from the beat of our own heart, the impulse of our spirit. As the Scriptures so beautifully express it, it is by God's light that we see light.

Let me put it another way! As soon as one begins to speak of intimacy, it raises the question as to how well we know ourselves, and with what degree of intimacy. We certainly know ourselves better than we can express our knowledge. Anyone who has ever been in love knows that. But there are times also when we feel we know ourselves hardly at all. We are a mystery to ourselves. We wonder why we do the things we do, say the things we say, feel the way we feel. And sometimes there are longings so deep, hauntings so tenuous, emotions so profound, that we cannot understand them ourselves let alone explain them to anyone else. We are a confusion even to ourselves. We can't make sense of us.

Now, one of the greatest things that the Apostle Paul ever said was that the Spirit knows us at the depth of our groaning. When our insight is exhausted and our understanding at an end; when all we can do is breathe a sigh too deep for words, or even tears, then at that depth, says Paul, we are understood by the Spirit.

Did you ever hear anyone groan? I heard a woman groan once, and I shall never forget it. She put her arms around her son to whom she was saying goodbye, believing that she would never see him again this side of heaven, and her love and loss were too deep to speak. She just held him to herself and groaned, and in that sound was all the sorrow of her soul and all the longing of her heart. Paul says that when we groan like that the Spirit interprets it, knows what it means. At that depth of knowledge, at that level of intimacy, we are understood, loved, accepted. And because of this it is by the Spirit that we come to know ourselves. The Spirit interprets us to ourselves, deepening our understanding, sharpening our insight, refining our sensitivity, drawing us into greater depths of self-knowledge and self-acceptance.

Now, if the Spirit knows us at the depth of our groaning, the consequences for faith are enormous. No part of our Christian life and experience is untouched by that insight. Think, for example, of how it enriches our understanding of prayer. We commonly say that we pray to God. And indeed we do. Except that Paul tells us that we do not even know how we ought to pray. It is the Spirit dwelling in the depth of us who, knowing us better than we know ourselves, teaches us how to pray. Our real prayers, the prayers that are sighs too deep for

words and groanings that cannot be uttered, are heard and understood and accepted by the Spirit who dwells within us. Our best prayers are not the ones we put into words, or even into thoughts. The best prayers are those in which the Spirit intercedes for us, understanding us at depths at which we do not understand ourselves, and making its knowledge of our needs the substance of our prayers. We say that we pray to God, and we do. But the best truth is that God prays to himself through us by the Spirit who dwells within us, moving at the very center of our being, acquainted with all our ways, familiar with all our thoughts, understanding us perfectly and so interpreting us to ourselves that this deep knowledge becomes not only the cry of our spirit but the words of our prayer.

But there is more! When we speak of the intimacy of the Spirit we mean not only God's knowledge of us, but our knowledge of God. How do we know God? By the Word God has spoken, and by the Word God has sent, of course. So it is that we are instructed by what is written in the Scriptures: There we have God's commandments, God's declared will, spoken to us through Israel and in Christ.

But suppose for a moment that God wishes for us an even more intimate knowledge of God's self, how would God accomplish it? He would give us his Spirit. That is how we measure the intimacy of relationships between us and our friends. Those who are closest to us, whom we love most intimately, we call "kindred spirits". It is not merely that we have information about them, or even that we live with them. It is that we share their inner life, we see with their eyes, feel with their sympathy, know what they would think and do. We know them from within. We catch their spirit, and they share ours.

What if God wants to make us kindred spirits with himself, giving us not merely his commandments but his heart? What if we can so know and love God that we begin to see others as God sees them, and to love them as God loves them? God does not wish that we should obey as those who must do what they are told to do. God offers us such intimacy with himself that we begin to catch his Spirit, share his purposes, dream his dreams. The words of Jesus become more than words spoken to us, they become God's word within us, shaping our attitudes, changing the way we look at things.

Carved into stone over the Department of Philosophy of an American University is the inscription, "Nestle into the mind of Plato and think from there." That would be no small undertaking. But that is exactly what God invites us to do in relation to himself, and it is the work of the Spirit that enables us to do it. The Spirit gives us such intimacy with God that we know God's thoughts and share God's heart so that our very mind becomes the mind that was in Christ Jesus. Martin Buber splendidly expresses the truth we are after. He says:

It is senseless to ask how far my action reaches, and where God's grace begins; there is no common border-line; what concerns me alone, before I bring something about, is my action, and what concerns me alone, when the action is successfully done is God's grace. The one is no less real than the other, and neither is a part-cause. God and man (sic) do not divide the government of the world between them; man's action is enclosed in God's action, but it is still real action.

To know the Spirit is to share the most profound intimacy with God. It is to be aware that God knows us from within, better than we know ourselves; and it is to be gathered into the secret of God's heart and to share God's love and to love God's purpose.

II. The first word is Intimacy. Notice, next, the Intractable Nature of the Spirit.

Is the word "intractable" familiar to you? In this context, it just means that the Spirit cannot be tamed, brought under our control, domesticated, possessed. We cannot set the Spirit's limits saying, "Thus far and no further!"

All of this is evident when we remember that another meaning of the Hebrew word for spirit means "wind". And this wind, while it may be a soft summer breeze to cool and refresh, is also the wind of the desert, mysterious, violent, powerful, irresistible.

That is why I read for you the story of our Lord's encounter with Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin, a ruler of the Jews. Nicodemus was an expert on religion. We know this because his first words to Jesus were, "Rabbi, we know..." And the reply of Jesus sets our knowledge of ourselves in the mystery of the Spirit. It is like the wind whose sound we hear and whose power we feel, but whose origin and destination are beyond our knowing. The Spirit is the power and mystery of

God, holding in itself all the Divine creativity and power of surprise, working not only in the depths of human personality, but on the moving edge of time, forcing us out further than we have ever gone before, bearing us to worlds unrealized and showing us visions too beautiful to be true.

This work of the Spirit is often unsettling. Just when we have marked the boundaries, set the limits, have settled comfortably into our familiar certainties, an inconsiderate, disrespectful wind blows to scatter what we thought could be contained, making our life less tidy and predictable than we had planned it to be.

That was Israel's experience. Where does the Spirit work? In Judaism, of course, within a chosen nation, the people of the Covenant. Except that the Spirit's work in Judaism was to enable the most discerning in Israel to recognize the Spirit's work in other places and among other peoples. How unsettling, for example, to discover the action of the Spirit in Rahab, a prostitute of Jericho, who when the city fell was the only one saved, along with those who were in her house. (I often wonder who was there and how astonished they must have been!)

Again, how strange that Ruth should be chosen as the person to carry forward God's good purpose. She was a Moabitess, a gentile. She did not belong among the chosen people and felt her loneliness when "sick for home, she stood in tears amid the alien corn." Yet her name is there, in a proud place, among those of whose blood King David was, and One greater than David, too.

Or again, think of the prophet Jonah weeping. He wept and wished to die because the people of Nineveh repented at his preaching. What a strange reaction for a preacher! Most preachers would be delighted by such a response. The trouble was that it compelled him to recognize and be reconciled to the unhappy truth that God's love reached beyond Israel even to people as foolish as the people of Nineveh, "who know not their right hand from their left." How disconcerting to Jonah that he had to widen his heart to include gentiles because God had already done so! The real preaching, you see, was not to Nineveh but to those in Israel who sought to limit the range of God's mercy.

And then came the greatest of the prophets, and he went to the synagogue at Nazareth, his own home town, and preached

the sermon. At first they were thrilled at the gracious words of one of their own boys come home. But then he said that while there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, the Spirit came, not to a widow of Israel, but to a gentile widow of Sidon. And there were many lepers in Israel in Elisha's time, yet it was Naaman, the Syrian, who was healed. The reaction of the people to this was immediate and violent. They leapt up and threw him out of the town. They attempted to hurl him over a cliff, so infuriated were they at his words. On another occasion he said it was a Samaritan, not a Priest or Levite, who had caught the Spirit; and of the faith of a Roman Centurion he declared that he had discovered nothing like it anywhere in Israel.

Notice what is happening! The Spirit is moving where It wills, not where we will It to move. The Spirit is not under our control and pays little heed to the limits we have set, but invites us to discover its presence where we did not expect to find it, and may not wish to find it.

This is a word we need to hear, because we still claim the Spirit as our possession, and to manage and control its action. Dr. Fosdick spoke once of a woman who was outraged to discover that Jesus was a Jew. "Jesus may have been a Jew," she declared, "but God is a Baptist!" Some of us think that arrogant and presumptuous of her, because we have a pretty firm conviction that God is a Presbyterian and loves the Reformed Faith. I know some Methodists who think God is a Methodist. We are like Simon the magician who in the Book of Acts tried to purchase the Holy Spirit for money so that he could use the Spirit for his own small purposes.

We can't use the Spirit to serve our own ends as though God had no purposes at all. We cannot reduce the sphere of God's activity to some limited region of our own deciding; and we cannot possess the Spirit, though we may be possessed by the Spirit. The Spirit is too great to become our possession. We cannot capture the Spirit in a book, however sacred; or keep the Spirit in a theology however reformed; or restrict the Spirit to a denomination, or limit the Spirit to the sacrament, or monopolize the Spirit in a religion.

One of my old teachers, who had been for years a missionary in China, used to say that when he entered a village in China he never thought that he was bringing the gospel for the first time.

Always he had a sense that the Spirit was already present. He then told of the Head Mistress of a high school in Osaka who was converted to Christianity by the Christ-likeness of a Buddhist monk! Now, you sort that one out! It can be understood only as the work of the same Spirit who will not be contained by our limited vision and love, but takes us to the limits of our horizons and beyond. I read once of an old Hindu woman who heard the good news of the gospel for the first time and responded to the story of Jesus and his love by saying, "I have always loved him, and now you have told me his name!" We must be very careful whom we close out of our neat plan of salvation. It might just be that the Spirit is out there with them!

III. Here is the third word by which to grasp the nature and work of the Third Person of the Trinity: *It is the word inspiration.*

When I was in London, Ontario, I talked to a man who told me he would like to join my church. He then went on to say that he wasn't sure that the church would have him, because he didn't believe in the Holy Spirit. "Of course you believe in the Holy Spirit," I replied. He told me he didn't think so. I told him, "But I know you do." He wanted to know what made me so sure and I replied that I was sure he believed in the Spirit because he was a musician. He began to look interested. Were there not times when, in the performance of his music, he was carried out of himself and beyond himself? He was eager to tell me that he had known such times. They were not as frequent as he would have wished, but they were the times that made all times, in which effort yielded to grace and competence to spontaneity and joy. "Then you have experienced the inspiration of the Spirit," I said. And now this man who a little while before was denying any belief in the Spirit was telling me what the work of the creative Spirit meant to him. He knew the Spirit. He just didn't know that he knew the Spirit. He had experienced the quickening of inspiration, but had not recognized it as the Spirit's work.

I find that when I speak of the Spirit, the most receptive listeners are those who are most creative: artists, musicians, composers, writers, singers, dancers—they all know what it means to be used by a Spirit that can elevate them to heights of creativity they could never achieve by themselves. Effort could

not accomplish it, though hard work makes it possible. Indeed, when they have mastered their technique, whether in paint or words or notes, they long for the coming of that creative Spirit which will give them thoughts and words and music that they know are not in them but may come through them. Their testimony is not that they did it, but that they received it.

Indeed, having said what I have just said to you, I know that at the close of worship there will be a person in business, and a scientist, and a physician, and a parent, and they will not allow me to limit the experience I have discussed to the arts. They, too, have had their moments of vision and insight; they, too, know what it means to be inspired.

What is required of us is that we should seek to fulfill the condition of the Spirit's coming. We need to do our work as well as we can, in the hope that the creative Spirit will take our best work and dwell in it, and elevate it above anything we have it in us to accomplish. We cannot predict or command or contrive the Spirit's coming. All we can do, in the lovely words of Emily Dickinson, is to "build a house that tries to be haunted". And if, mysteriously and by its own good pleasure, the Spirit comes to dwell in our house, the Spirit will give us what we could not have produced by ourselves. Said Hemingway, "Most of the time I write as well as I can; occasionally I write better." There is a power that is not in us but may come through us, and it is inexhaustible.

We must decide how we are going to regard ourselves. Are we power-boats or sail boats? Are we driven by our own energy, and must we carry all our fuel with us? But if that is what we are, we may run out of energy and have no power left. I know people who have done that. They have driven themselves for years, and now they are empty and tired.

But what if we are sail-boats, not generating our own power, but able to find the wind and lift a sail? What if all the breezes of heaven are blowing, and all we need to do is catch them and allow them to bear us to our destination? Can't you feel the wind on your cheek, and moving in your hair? Are you not now dreaming of where it might carry you, and of the sense of adventure of the journey? There is a lovely old hymn that begins: "I feel the winds of God today, today my sail I lift." Do it! Set up a sail!

O my brave soul!

O farther, farther sail!
O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all
the seas of God?
O farther, farther, farther sail.