

God is Spirit

Isaiah 61: 1-4, Psalm 104, John 4: 21-24

Our text from John 4 is about God, as Spirit; it's also about worship. Let's reflect this morning about these two dimensions of this text.

First, how should we think about God, as Christians? Specifically, what do we believe about the Spirit? Let's explore this assertion that God is Spirit.

First, the word "God." As you know it's not only Christians who believe in "God." Jews and Muslims, and others as well, believe in one Creator God, and share in much the same tradition going more than 3000 years back to Abraham.

Our indigenous people also traditionally believe in one Creator God.

But the whole concept of God is widely under attack these days, in our scientific, secular culture. Some people say the whole idea of God is incredible, or irrelevant.

I can understand why some people feel that way. We can't see God. We can't touch God. God is inaccessible to a scientific laboratory. So God can't be verified in a scientific manner.

And we don't see God intervening supernaturally to solve our problems.

We have horrendous suffering and misery in this world. We have millions upon millions of refugees, abject poverty is rampant in many parts of the world, we have natural disasters in spades, we have climate change, and mortal danger to all life on the planet.

We don't see God swooping down and fixing it all up for us.

So I can see why the atheist says there is no God.

So what's the point in believing in God? Why is it important to us? Why should we care?

Well, for these traditions I've mentioned "God" means the Creator, the ultimate Source of everything, the Unoriginated Origin, the Eternal.

The One who has no beginning, but is the Source of all the things that begin and come to an end.

If God is the Source of everything, God determines the purpose of everything, including our own lives.

So God has to do with why we exist, why anything exists, and the meaning of everything.

More than that, since God is the Creator, the Alpha, the beginning, God also has to do with the Omega, the End, - where's it all going, the destiny of everyone and everything.

Now, I know that may seem rather abstract and theoretical, far removed from all the practical, nitty gritty things we think about every day.

But people have always asked these deep questions:

Where have we come from? Where are we going? What's it's all about?

Without God, there are no answers.

If here is no God, then this amazing world, and our lives within it, have come from nowhere, are going nowhere, and mean absolutely nothing.

A character from Shakespeare put it well: life is a "tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing."

Without God, our lives are finally about.... Nothing! Eventually, everything ends in dust and ashes.

And that I find unbelievable. That's why belief in God has staying power all over the world, even in our scientific, secular culture. Because we sense that our lives are not about nothing. There's so much love and beauty in this world. There is so much meaning in our lives. This world cannot be about... Nothing.

But now, what do we say about this God – this invisible Being that we cannot see or touch?

Perhaps if we could see God with our eyes, we would be blinded. If we could hear God with our ears, we would be deafened. One biblical text says: "No one can see God, and live."

Definitely, if we could see or hear God directly, we would be, to say the least, intimidated. I suppose if God were visible, meting out rewards and punishments, we would all become obedient little automatons.

The direct visible presence of God would so terrify us that the freedom of our humanity would be destroyed.

So, if God wanted to get through to us, to communicate with us, God would have to do so gently.

The Bible talks about God revealing Godself. God shows us who God is, but does so indirectly, behind a veil, you might say, incognito, ever so gently, in a “still, small voice.”

For us Christians, the heart of that revelation is Jesus, who is said to be “filled with the Spirit.”

All right, what about this word “Spirit?”

The Gospel of John identifies the nature of God with three metaphors: God is Light, he says in one place. Also, God is Love. And God is Spirit.

Think of God, he says, in those terms. Compare the invisible, unfathomable God to something we do know: Light, and Love, and also Spirit.

But this word Spirit is interesting.

According to John, Jesus said: “God IS Spirit.” What does that mean?

We’re used to hearing about the Holy Spirit, we talk and sing all the time about the Holy Spirit.

Remember, when we used to talk about the Holy Ghost? Like in the older version of the doxology. “Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.” But we don’t talk that way anymore. It’s kind of spooky. But God isn’t spooky.

I heard about a little girl in Sunday School. Her teacher told her that the Holy Ghost was always with her. Even when she’s alone in her room at night, she should never be afraid, because the Holy Ghost is always there.

Well, in the middle of the night, her mother heard her crying out, “Mommy, mommy.” Mommy came running to see what was the matter. She said:

“The Holy Ghost is in the cupboard. I’m afraid of the Holy Ghost.”

So we don’t talk about the Holy Ghost. That’s just old English, and it’s spooky.

Instead, we say Holy Spirit, or Spirit of God.

But notice that in this text, ‘Spirit’ is God’s very nature. God IS Spirit.

So what’s the basic meaning of “Spirit?”

First, I suppose it says something about what God is not. God is not a physical body, located in some particular place. God is not sitting on a throne up above the sky somewhere.

But, positively, the basic meaning of Spirit is Wind or Breath. In both Hebrew and Greek, the two languages of the Bible, the same words are used to refer to ordinary wind, or breath, and to the presence and power of God.

For example, in the creation story of Genesis 1, we hear “the Wind of God swept over the face of the waters...”

But sometimes this is translated, “The Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters.” Wind and Spirit – the very same word.

The poet imagines God blowing or breathing upon the chaos of the world, creating order and life.

It’s basic to the biblical faith that the whole creation is shot through with the divine presence.

God did not create just once at the beginning, and then retire. Rather, God is constantly present in the creative, innovative processes of nature, breathing life and energy and intelligence into all things, and even into human affairs.

Consider the story of the escape of the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. We might be skeptical about some of the supernatural details of that story in the book of Exodus. Like a rod turning into a snake, and water standing up like walls.

But something amazing actually happened there. An earth shaking, history-making event. Moses mobilized the people, and affected a social revolution when the people escaped to freedom.

In the book of Numbers, we are told that the wind, or breath of God was upon Moses as he led the slaves to freedom.

It’s like in the hymn, “Breathe on me breath of God.”

This can be translated, “The Breath of God,” was upon Moses.” The Breath, or Spirit of God, we are told, was the inspiration that empowered Moses to confront the Pharaoh, and lead the slaves across the water to liberation.

Do you see how apt the metaphor is? Wind is invisible, yet extremely powerful. The power of the wind can be terrifying.

The wind is uncontained and uncontainable, unpredictable. So we can’t lock the Spirit in, within the walls of the church. The wind of God is free.

Moreover, when we breathe, wind or breath is inside and outside of us at the same time.

It’s very peculiar. God’s Spirit is like that: both inside us and outside of us.

Spirit, however, is a very rich word. It has another, very different meaning. Spirit, in the Bible, sometimes means the human spirit, in the sense of our interior self. Our inner life, our selfhood, our self-awareness.

We experience ourselves as spirit. You can experience yourself as spirit right now. Look inside, and notice your spirit. You are a soul, you are a self, you are a spirit. You are a person, who knows, who thinks, who plans, who loves.

You and I are amazing creatures. We are more than physical beings. Your spirit, or soul, is that mysterious, personal inside of you.

So when we say God is Spirit, or speak of the Spirit of God, we refer to God as a personal Entity. One who knows, who thinks, who plans, who loves.

In that respect, we are like God, made in God’s image. God is Spirit. We are spirits.

When we say that God is Spirit, we mean not only that God is like the wind, but also that God is a purposeful Someone. Not something, but Someone.

God is Spirit in a way far greater than we are. But this implies that God is not a blind force. God is Spirit – an immense, unfathomable Intelligence, a Mindfulness, far, far beyond our own.

Now, returning to our text in John 4, we notice that this text is about worship. It’s about true worship, versus false worship.

The story goes that Jesus was getting water at a well, and there he finds himself in a conversation with a Samaritan woman.

Recall that the Samaritans and the Jews were enemies; Jews and Samaritans regarded each other as foreigners, but also as heretics.

It's remarkable that Jesus is talking with this woman at all, because a Jewish man was not supposed to talk to any woman in public, let alone a Samaritan woman.

But, that's the kind of thing Jesus did. Jesus, remember, was "filled with the Spirit." There was a special freedom and power about Jesus.

Since Jesus has spoken to her, the woman, surprised that he's speaking to her, opens a theological debate:

We Samaritans, she says, worship God on the holy mountain, (by which she means Mount Gerazim). But you Jews disagree, you worship in Jerusalem (at Mount Zion).

But Jesus says: No, no, it's neither here nor there, where you worship. This mountain or that mountain..., means nothing.

Because, he says, God is Spirit. God is like the wind. God is present everywhere, can be worshiped anywhere. What matters is not where you worship. What matters is whether you worship in spirit and in truth.

To "worship in spirit and in truth." What does that mean? Do you think we do that here, at East Plains? Do we worship in spirit and in truth? Is that what we're doing right now, here in church?

I suggest that to worship in spirit and in truth, is to worship from your true inner being. It means to worship with sincerity, from the heart.

It's your heart that matters, not where you do it, whether on this or that mountain, this or that church. It doesn't matter whether you're in church, or at home, or wherever..... What matters is your heart. True worship is from the heart.

But worshipping from the heart is more than just an emotion, not just a kind of enthusiasm.

I suggest that, to worship "in spirit and in truth" means that your spirit is in line with God's Spirit.

It means that your mind is in line with God's mind; your purpose in life is in line with God's purpose in the world.

For us as Christians, God's Mind, and God's purpose is made known to us through the prophets, whom we read in the Bible, and especially through Jesus. It's only through them that we know what the Spirit does, or what the Spirit wants of us.

We learn from the great prophets of the Hebrew scriptures, and from Jesus, what God's Spirit is striving to do, within us, in our lives, and in the world.

I've already mentioned Moses. What the Spirit was doing through Moses was liberating the slaves from Egypt. We learn that the Creator Spirit, wants justice and compassion and liberty in human affairs.

God wants joy, God wants happiness for all people. Slaves must, therefore, go free.

And when we listen to the later prophets, centuries later, we find that their main concern, again, is justice, mercy, and compassion. Because God wants joy for all people.

That's what the Spirit was striving to do with the people of Israel all through their history.

As in our text this morning from Isaiah 61, from about the sixth century before Christ, we hear again of the Spirit:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me," says the prophet: "to proclaim good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to prisoners...." He goes on later: "to repair ruined cities, and the devastation of many generations."

According to the prophet, this is what the Spirit of God is doing in the world.

We notice in the gospel of Luke, that Jesus cites this text from Isaiah concerning himself: Jesus says: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to captives, and liberty to the oppressed."

Care for the poor, justice, mercy compassion, healing, freedom. This is what God's Spirit is about.

This is just one text, but there are many like this, all through the scriptures.

What God's Spirit is doing is leading, inspiring and empowering human beings to greater justice, mercy and compassion, and therefore, greater and greater joy for all people.

Within this long process, we hear that God strives and suffers with us; that sometimes God is angry, sometimes God weeps over us, and sometimes God rejoices with us when love and justice flourish.

Now it's interesting that another prophet, Amos, connects God's will for justice, with the whole matter of worship.

The prophet Amos, about eight centuries before Christ, was indignant about the unjust treatment of the poor: He says that the people:

“... sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.... They trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way... You ... afflict the righteous, take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate....”

Amos believed that all these people would one day be harshly judged.

What does Amos say about worship? He proclaims that God rejects the worship of those who do not practice justice, mercy and compassion.

Listen to Amos, speaking out for God:

“I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in our solemn assemblies... Take away from me the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the melody of your harps; But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

It's very clear: Worship, in spirit and in truth, must express itself in justice, mercy and compassion. It's not just what you do in church that counts. It's what you do with your life.

If our worship and our lives don't match, it's phony worship. It's not sincere; it's not from the heart.

If our spirit is not in line with God's Spirit, it is not worship in spirit and in truth.

So I suppose we can all ask ourselves whether our worship here in church is in spirit and in truth.

Are we instruments of the Spirit by acting with justice, mercy and compassion?
Do we increase joy in the world? In all our relationships, in family life, with friends, with people we know who are in need:

As citizens of our city, our province, our nation, as voters, as advocates, by the way we think and speak, by the way we act, are we instruments of the Spirit?

As a congregation, are we just a bunch of people who sing songs and say prayers?
Or are we, because of that, agents of the Spirit in the world around us?

I think we are. I hope we are, to some degree agents of the Spirit.

We're not moral heroes. We don't have much power or influence in the world. But we do try to reach out in small ways to refugees, to street people, through the Agape group, through Wesley, through the Tekere mission, through mission and service.

And in our personal lives, sometimes through our work, some of us are quietly exercising love and compassion.

I believe we can be, and we are agents of the Spirit of God by our attitudes and our small actions.

The strange thing about the Spirit of God: While God is utterly powerful, and the source of all power, the presence of God in the world is vulnerable and fragile.

The Scriptures plead with us not to quench the Spirit, not to grieve the Spirit. Because we can resist and fight against the Spirit.

Because the Spirit, embodied above all in Jesus, is gentle, does not force, or dominate.

Strangely enough, the Spirit of God strives and struggles within us in ways contrary to the ways of this world – this world where “money talks,” where the strong dominate the weak, where injustice and inequality rule –

the Spirit is leading us to stand against all that, and to move the world forward in another direction – the way of justice, mercy and compassion. Toward greater joy for all people.

Now let me close with a prayer, the one that we sang earlier this morning:

“Spirit of life, come unto me,
Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea,
Move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close, wings set me free
Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.

Let us keep a moment of silence.

Hymn 382: “Breathe on me, Breath of God.”