

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“The Vocabulary of Faith: The Spirit”  
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Genesis 1:1-5  
Acts 2:1-13

We stood on the sidewalk and felt utterly defeated. We thought that we had helped to save a life, yet it was not to be. The year was 1978 and I was living in the Philippines as a Peace Corps Volunteer. I lived in a communal house with other volunteers, some Filipinas and a Japanese volunteer. Several months after moving in, a young woman with a baby on her hip came to our door. She did not speak English or Tagalog which we all spoke. But through some patient interaction we realized that she was looking for work as a lavandera, meaning she wanted to wash our clothes. At first, I was resistant, but then my friends convinced me that it would help her and that we could quit spending hours washing our clothes by hand in a tub. As time went by we discerned parts of her story. She lived in Manila’s largest slum. Her husband had deserted her, and she was forced to live with her in laws. One day though she arrived in tears. As best we could make out, one of her children was dying. We told her to bring the child to us. When she returned with him, we were shocked. His entire body was covered with open sores. Gathering what little money we had, we found a dermatologist who told us he had scabies, a creature that burrows in under the skin. She quickly prescribed some medicine but warned us that unless it was applied exactly as noted, he would die. With our last few pesos we purchased the medication, stepped out onto the sidewalk, and then realized that we had no way to tell her how to use it. We were defeated. But then, a woman walking by stopped and asked if we needed help. We told her the problem. She then asked the woman a question in a language we did not understand. They conversed. The woman on the sidewalk then said, “I grew up the village next to hers. I will explain to her how to use this.” My friends, I believe that this is the work of the Spirit because how else, in a city of 7.2 million people, could a woman take two buses and a jeepney from an inner-city slum, come to our street and our house and then when all hope was lost have another woman from a remote village of fewer than a thousand people, happen to walk by, stop and intercede? This is the work of the Spirit because the Spirit is the active presence of God, creating new realities, out of impossibilities. Let me say that again. The Spirit is the active presence of God, creating new realities, out of impossibilities.

The Spirit is the active presence of God creating new realities out of impossibilities. Throughout history, people have struggled to understand the Spirit. Many have seen it merely as the power of God, like a wind rushing forth. Others have seen it as something like The Force, in Star Wars; this generic power that is accessible to all people. The scriptures make it clear though, that the Spirit is more than either of these. It is literally the active presence of God at work in the world. What I mean by this is that just as we talked about last week, that God showed up in Jesus to redeem the world, God shows up once again in the Spirit. God shows up in ways and in times and in places where we least expect to find God, and makes things happen. The scripture has stories of the Spirit ahead of people, making new things possible, such as in the wilderness where God’s people were led to freedom. The scripture has stories of the Spirit within people, applying the work of Jesus in order to transform them. The scripture has stories of the Spirit behind people pushing them along, such as the Apostle’s Paul being pushed to preach to the Gentiles. David Paterson once said that he saw the Spirit as the great annoyer. I think this is right

because the Spirit never leaves things as they are but is the active power of God helping to make things into what they ought to be.

The Spirit is the active presence of God creating new realities out of impossibilities. This can be seen clearly in the story of creation. As the book of Genesis opens, we see the Spirit of God hovering over the chaos below. This, by the way, is the Biblical story of creation that God confronts, not emptiness but chaos; a chaos that will not allow life to form and flourish. To create a new life-giving reality out of this chaos was understood as something only God could do. And so the Spirit “hovers” over the watery chaos preparing to give birth to a new creation. I say this because the Hebrew word for hover is what is used to describe a mother hen or dove, hovering over her nest in order to help birth new life. So when the Spirit (in Hebrew the same word “*ruach*” can be translated as Spirit, breath or wind) hovers, it is God being actively present creating a new life giving reality.

The Spirit is the active presence of God bringing new realities out of impossibilities. We see this in the story of Pentecost. On the Jewish holiday of Pentecost, the disciples were still hiding out. Even though they had seen and experienced the risen Jesus and had been instructed to go into all the world making more disciples, they had no idea how to accomplish this task. They knew it was an impossible task. Who would believe a story of a crucified and risen messiah? Who would believe it from bunch of barely literate Galileans? How would they tell the story such that people would believe them? How could they begin to create this new reality that Jesus had called the kingdom when they had no power and no authority? This task had impossible written all over it. Yet on that Pentecost day, the Spirit invaded their upper room and pushed and pulled them out in power, to create a new reality, the Jesus’ community, by telling the story of Jesus’ work, in multiple languages. That day, according to the story in Acts, more than 3,000 people believed, and the core of this new kingdom community was born.

What does this have to do with us? What it tells us is that our future is not limited by our past. Our future is not determined by our past because the Spirit as the active presence of God can create new realities out of impossibilities in us. We are not trapped in our lives because God can and will be a transforming agent in our lives. This is so both for our personal lives and our corporate life as Everybody’s Church. It means that we as a community of faith are not constricted by what has been but through the Spirit we can continue to become that new reality that God is creating in and through the Spirit. This is especially relevant today as we install our new elders and deacons. It is so because these persons, along with those already on session and the board of deacons are called to listen for the work of the Spirit, leading us into God’s new reality.

Before I close, I want to circle back to my story. The ointment worked. The child lived. And then my friends and I got together more pesos and paid for our lavandera and her children to leave the slum in which she was living and move back to her island community and her family who could help care for them. This too I believe was the work of the Spirit. Through my friends and I and the woman on the street, God created a new reality out of an impossibility for this family.

My challenge to you on this day is this, that as you go through your week, ask yourself, how am I open to God’s active presence in my life, creating new realities in and through me?