

Immortal, Invisible God

sermon digest

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John 4:19-30

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Pentecost is a day in the life of the church, the fiftieth day after Easter, for Jews, the fiftieth day after Passover. A day comes and goes. Yesterday is the day before; tomorrow is the day after. A day is the basic building block of history. When a day passes, the new is born; thus, we celebrate birthdays, and occasionally we contemplate the frightening fact that there was a day when I was not. Christmas Eve is the day before Jesus, the day before his birth. Holy Saturday is the day after Jesus, the day after his death. As we look back on history, Christians celebrate the birth and remember the death of Jesus; for those were days that changed the world.

On Pentecost we usually read Acts 2 that begins, "When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place." The story describes a little band of disciples gathered with Mary, praying, waiting, anticipating, hoping, reaching, and finally acting on the legacy of Jesus. Followers were energized like never before. The spirit/wind blew through the gathering, and the community of faith breathed a new understanding into the confused mass of spectators. Words flowed from tongues "as of fire." Barriers that alienate and separate into the confusion of jabbering nationalities fell down, and people heard and understood the good news of Jesus. In a day, 120 disciples became a church of 5,000. The church began to move out—out of Jerusalem, out of Judea, out of Samaria to the ends of the earth.

As a day in the Christian year, Pentecost, like Christmas or Easter, is certainly an event that changed the world, but the Holy Spirit was not born on Pentecost like Jesus was born on Christmas. There was not a yesterday before the Spirit of God and a tomorrow after. The poetry of creation in Genesis describes the wind/spirit of God moving over the face of the waters of chaos bringing forth life and order, and the breath/spirit of God was breathed into a lump of clay to bring life into the human. Before his birth, John the Baptist was described as one filled with the Holy Spirit. When Mary challenged the angelic annunciation of her conception of Jesus, she was told, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The ministry of Jesus begins with his baptism and the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. Long before Pentecost and long before the Gospel of John, "God is Spirit." It is not something that God becomes, as the Word became flesh in Jesus the Christ. God's nature is Spirit.

God is Spirit. The word appears in John 4. Jesus engages the woman at the well in his longest sustained conversation found in the Gospels. She must have a name, but she is simply called "the woman." Typical of John, the conversation weaves back and forth between the physical and the spiritual, between the water of Jacob's well and the living water that Jesus gives that will "become . . . a spring of water gushing up to eternal life." When the conversation turns to personal matters, the woman perceives a prophetic insight from Jesus. She is either very uncomfortable and wishes to change the subject, or she is amazed and wishes to pursue a better understanding of God. Although men were not supposed to discuss theology with women, and Jews did not consider Samaritans to be in the family of God, Jesus took up the debate proposition that stood between Samaritans and Jews, the geography of religion. Is the center of worship to be located in the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim or in the Jewish temple in Jerusalem on Mount Zion? This was the kind of question that could fuel debate for hours without resolution. Samaritans defined the Torah ahead of their Jewish kin and claimed their temple as superior to the reconstruction of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is the stuff that sustains hatred between Jews and Muslims, Christians and Jews, and filters on down to all of the theological debates that keep Catholics from having Communion with Protestants and conservatives from associating with liberal Christians. This also describes the chaos of Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost.

According to Josephus, Samaritans constructed their temple around 335 BCE to be destroyed in 129 BCE. Jews despised Samaritans as half-breeds who had corrupted their religion with Hellenistic-Gentile practices. At the time of Christ, the tension between Samaritan and Jew was high. For the woman to bring the issue of worship location into the conversation with Jesus invited a long conversation to become an endless loop. Jesus cut it short. "God is Spirit." God is not a pile of rocks on top of anyone's mountain. God transcends all of our idols whether they are made of the materials

of religion, the images of our minds, or the fabric of our cultural roots.

The illusive God is greater than our institutional churches and more than doctrinal distinctives of our denominational debates. The picture corresponds to the whole gospel. All questions of religion come to rest on the nature of God. If God were subject to being housed in our places of worship, finding the right mountain or steeple or label might be important. But God cannot be nailed down to our places and things. God cannot be captured by our science or our logic. The eternal God transcends the mundane history of our religions.

God is Spirit—not a spirit among all of the possible spirits—God is Spirit. The statement is very close to the simple declaration in 1 John, “God is love.” The sentence is structured so that the two words are not just synonyms. Neither Spirit nor love can say all that there is to say about God, but both words go to the core of God’s nature. Raymond Brown is right. Jesus is offering more than a simple definition of God; even our definitions become our idols.

The conversation parallels the previous discussion with Nicodemus. Jesus calls the Hebrew scholar to lift his eyes to visions of God greater than the ordinary debates in the halls of academic religion. Listen to the wind, Nicodemus; the mystery of God is like the mysterious movement of the wind. Wind-spirit-breath are the same word. The Wind/Spirit is an unseen, incomprehensible presence that moves and disturbs. To be born anew is to be born of the Spirit. God is Spirit.

Worshippers are spiritually wired. The response of Jesus to the question of worship with the woman at the well focused not only on the nature of God, but on the nature of worshippers of God. In the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus called for vision beyond the physical experience of birth to being born of the Spirit. With the woman, he lifted the vision from the water in the well to the living water that quenches the spiritual thirst and from the location of temples to the nature of God. Jesus views persons, both the male theological scholar and the morally loose woman, as spiritually wired for experiences with the Spirit God.

A few years ago, Billy Williams was enrolled in a trial at Harvard Medical School for the treatment of a particular cancer. Between gamma knife treatments he attended seminars based on the research of Dr. Herbert Benson on the spiritual dimension of healing the human body. Billy brought back one of Benson’s books *Timeless healing: The Power and Biology of Belief*. Benson observed that doctors tend “not to sympathize with beliefs and imaginings that may be stirring the body to action in ways an outside observer cannot measure (P.50).” His research led to the conclusion that people are more than bodies. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

John F. Haught wrote a theological response to the “New Athiests” (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens) in his recent book *God and the New Atheism*. Haught is critical of poor science in closing the door on the possibility of any reality beyond the reach of the physical senses, and he is amazed at the poor reading of religion and complete lack of any awareness of theologians who have spoken directly to their questions. The whole issue comes down to an outlook on the world that assumes that all reality is subject to scientific examination. Only the material world is real.

On this Day of Pentecost let us reach beyond the reality that we can easily see and measure to the reality that sees and measures us, to the immortal, invisible God. God is Spirit.