



Summer Preaching Series: Questions of Faith

Who Is the Holy Spirit?



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
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An audio version of this sermon may be found on the Grace Church website at <http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/2017-07-02-AAA.mp3>.

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Grace Episcopal Church
The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost
July 2, 2017

Our summer preaching series on “Questions of Faith” continues this morning. And I have the great pleasure of addressing the question, “Who is the Holy Spirit?”

Who IS the Holy Spirit? What a question! Fortunately, I had a great resource as I prepared for my sermon today. Some of you may know this, others may not... but our Book of Common Prayer, that red book with the gold cross on the cover in the pews in front for you, is a treasure trove of information for us Episcopalians. In it, we find the structure for our worship services, prayers, psalms, AND information about the Episcopal Church’s doctrinal beliefs. Some of this information about our denominational beliefs is located in a very helpful section at the back of the prayer book called “the Catechism.”

The word Catechism comes from a Greek word that means, “to teach orally.” The catechism in our Book of Common Prayer is formatted as a series of questions and answers, the purpose of which is to help instruct Christian understanding and provoke us to further explore questions of faith. The Catechism addresses a number of topics – everything from human nature, to the Trinity, sacraments, saints, and much more. It is not meant to be a doctrinal absolute, but rather a launching pad for deeper exploration of our Christian faith. It is an outline of our faith; based on Holy Scripture, inherited church tradition, and human experience and reason.

That being said, I invite you to grab one of those red books from your pew, and turn with me to page 852. Everybody found it? Half way down page 852 is a section conveniently entitled, “The Holy Spirit.” What follows are five questions and brief responses about the Spirit. The questions posed by the catechism are:

1. Who is the Holy Spirit?
2. How is the Holy Spirit revealed in the Old Covenant?
3. How is the Holy Spirit revealed in the New Covenant?
4. How do we recognize the presence of the H.S. in our lives?
5. How do we recognize the truths taught by the Holy Spirit?

The first question, “Who is the Holy Spirit?” is the main question I’ve been tapped to address today, but to respond to that question it is helpful to explore the other four questions and responses that the catechism poses on the subject. They’re all bound up together. So this morning we’ll look briefly at these five questions and responses.

Question 1: Who is the Holy Spirit? According to the catechism, the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, God at work in the world and in the Church even now. Let’s unpack that a bit. The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity, the Trinity being our triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three co-exist together. They are one in the same, and yet, they are individual entities. The Spirit is described in scripture as the power of God, the breath of God, the life-giving force of God. The Spirit has actively and generously been engaged, as the prayer book says, in the world and in the Church throughout time. Which leads us to the next three questions our Catechism addresses.

Question 2: How is the Holy Spirit revealed in the Old Covenant? The Catechism suggests that the Holy Spirit is revealed in the Old Covenant as the giver of life, the One who spoke through the prophets. When the Catechism refers to the “Old Covenant” it means the covenant God made with God’s chosen people, the Hebrews. This relationship is recounted in the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible. The book of Genesis tells us that in the beginning, when the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, God’s Spirit brooded over the nothingness. The Spirit is present at the beginning of creation as God fashions the cosmos out of

nothingness. The Spirit is mentioned throughout the scriptures of the Hebrew Bible, always coming to particular people at particular times for particular reasons. The Spirit comes not to all people, but to some, strengthening them and guiding them into right relationship with God, so that they in turn, may lead others to do the same. We see this exemplified in the stories of Abraham, Moses, David, and the prophets.

But perhaps the place in Scripture where we glimpse the Spirit's power most fully, is in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Which leads us to the third question addressed by the Catechism – How is the Holy Spirit revealed in the New Covenant? The prayer book says, that the Holy Spirit is revealed as the Lord who leads us into all truth and enables us to grow in the likeness of Christ. The New Covenant is the relationship with God that we have through Jesus. Our New Testament scriptures attest to who Jesus was and tell us about the beginning of the movement his followers started, what we now call Christianity. In these scriptures, we learn that in his baptism, Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit – that is he was immersed with God's life-giving power. Through the Spirit, Jesus taught about God, healed the sick, cared for the poor and the outcast and shared God's grace with all he encountered. Though the rulers of his day killed Jesus, through the power of the Spirit, Jesus rose from the dead. He appeared to his followers and promised them that they too would be filled with the Spirit's power once he ascended into heaven. Jesus' promise was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit filled those who followed Jesus, with joy, power, and courage. Filled with the Spirit, Jesus' followers risked all, even their lives, to share Jesus' story and invite others to join them in living lives of love in right relationship with one another, God and all of creation.

Do you hear a theme here? The Holy Spirit, both in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament is a creative, life-giving presence that fills people with the desire and the gumption to do something counter cultural. The Spirit permeates God's people propelling them to live lives like Jesus, lives of power, of vulnerability, and of love.

Which leads us to the fourth question posed about the Holy Spirit in our Catechism, which is, "How do we recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives?" The response the prayer book gives is that we know the Spirit is present when we acknowledge Jesus as Lord and we strive to be in right relationship with God, one another, and creation. When we seek to live like Jesus, when we strive for the Kingdom of God, loving others as ourselves, hungering for justice and righteousness, acting like Christ, we can be pretty sure the Spirit is the driving force behind our conviction.

I experienced the Spirit's power most recently a few weeks ago on the Youth mission experience to Atlanta. We worked with an organization called DOOR, which stands for Discovering Opportunities for Outreach and Reflection. DOOR arranged our scheduled time in Atlanta, sending us to work in different social service agencies during the day and then helping us to reflect on our experiences in the evening. I know the Holy Spirit was present during this trip. I could see the Spirit's power at work in our teenagers who deeply cared for one another and for strangers. Our teens, who made themselves vulnerable, stepping out of their comfort zones, to show others that they cared about them and then reflected about how their faith compelled them to participate in a mission trip the first week of summer vacation when their friends were relaxing and enjoying a break.

I know that the Spirit was present during this time, not only because I felt it here, in my heart, but also because of the answer the prayer book gives to the last question it poses about the Holy Spirit – How do we recognize truths taught by the Holy Spirit? We recognize the Spirit's truths when they are in accord with scripture. To return to my mission trip example, the truth of human compassion, kindness, seeing Christ in all people, were experiences I witnessed in Atlanta, and these truths seem to be in accord with scripture.

So, who is the Holy Spirit? In a nutshell, the Spirit was present at the dawn of creation, hovering on the verge of newness. This same spirit is referenced throughout Holy Scripture and in every reference, the Spirit's presence heralds change, new things, and power. The Holy Spirit is God's Spirit, present at the beginning of creation, present throughout history, and present today – hovering over the world still, seeking to embolden, in-

spire, and empower. I've seen the Holy Spirit at work. I've felt the Spirit's power, present right here, encouraging me and others to be like Jesus. The Bible describes the Spirit as our comforter, helper, advocate, guide, and teacher. The Catechism helps us to further explore these roles of the Spirit over time and in our own lives. May this same Spirit, guide you and lead you into all truth, propelling you to right relationship with God, one another, and all creation. Amen.