

Looking for the Spirit of Life

Psalm 104:24-30

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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I

A common phrase lots of people have been using the last few months is “go back to normal.” You’ll hear it in sentences like, “When we go back to normal, I want to take a cruise in the Caribbean,” or “I’m so ready for everything to go back to normal, like it was before the coronavirus.” We understand this desire, of course. People want their jobs back. They want to travel. They want to have family reunions. Parents want to send their children off to school buildings.

In the church, we’d also like to go back to normal—to sing in the sanctuary, to sip Fair Trade coffee together, to savor deviled eggs and raspberry trifle at potluck dinners.

But what if the Holy Spirit doesn’t want quite everything to go back to normal? What if the Holy Spirit wants to nudge us forward into something new?

II

Today is Pentecost. On Pentecost Sunday, Mennonites dutifully talk about the Holy Spirit—and then more or less ignore the Spirit the rest of the year. For many Mennonites in North America, the Spirit is the neglected member of the Trinity, the one we talk about the least.

However, the Holy Spirit is a much more important member of the Trinity than we sometimes think. The Spirit did not suddenly appear out of nowhere on the day of Pentecost. No, the Holy Spirit had been active a long time before that. In the beginning of time, the Spirit proceeded from God, swept over the face of the deep, and caused the world to be created (Genesis 1). The Holy Spirit also entered

a long line of Israel's prophets and prophetesses, inspiring their speech and energizing their actions. In the New Testament, it was by the activity of the Spirit that Mary became pregnant with Jesus (Luke 1). And we don't want to forget that at Jesus' baptism, the Holy Spirit became his partner—a partnership that lasted throughout Jesus' life and only ended with his death (Matthew 27). So for many centuries, the Holy Spirit was actively involved in creation, prophecy, and redemption.

The Holy Spirit plays another extremely important role. This role is the ongoing sustenance and renewal of the world. Our doorway to this is Psalm 104. I want to read for you verses 24-30, using the *Ecumenical Grail Psalter*. [Share my screen.]

²⁴How many are your works, O LORD!

In wisdom you have made them all.

The earth is full of your creatures.

²⁵Vast and wide is the span of the sea,

with its creeping things past counting,

living things great and small.

²⁶The ships are moving there,

and Leviathan you made to play with.

²⁷All of these look to you

to give them their food in due season.

²⁸You give it, they gather it up;

you open wide your hand, they are well filled.

²⁹You hide your face, they are dismayed;
you take away their breath, they die,
returning to the dust from which they came.
³⁰When you send forth your breath, they are created,
and you renew the face of the earth.

These verses portray a Spirit who intimately involves herself with the ongoing life of creation. Notice this. The Spirit works moment by moment in the ongoing life of the world, not just in the original moments of creation. On land and sea, the Spirit lives and breathes through every creature—snails, wild turkeys, red foxes, fragrant peonies, and great blue whales. So intimate is this relationship that if the Spirit withdraws, the life of the world dies. This is true not just in Goshen, but also in Bogota and Amsterdam and Mumbai and Nairobi. Everywhere and always, the Spirit actively pursues the creation and re-creation of life, hoping for newness, pressing for fresh possibilities.

Maybe you noticed that little word “ships” in verse 26. Ships are a form of technology invented by humans. Here the psalm hints that the Spirit even works in the creation and maintenance of technologies that benefit human society.

III

Today I want to impress upon us that the activity of the Holy Spirit was not limited to that long-ago day in Jerusalem when tongues of fire appeared over the heads of the male and female disciples. No, the Holy Spirit is breathing in your home right now, inside you and around you. Moreover, at this very moment the Spirit is cavorting with the robins in your front yard, the chipmunks in your back yard, and the maple tree in your side yard. In short, the Holy Spirit is everywhere you look, if you open your eyes to see.

IV

What might all this mean for us, now? The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann says that the Holy Spirit is fundamentally about life. Indeed, he says the Spirit is a Spirit of Life.¹ Above all, this Spirit wants to replace the tired, worn-out aspects of our lives with fresh realities. To put it succinctly, the Holy Spirit rarely wants things to go back to normal. We may want things to go back to normal, but that's not usually what the Spirit wants. Instead the Spirit wants us to press forward, to dream of what could be.

What might these things be? Well, we can begin by noticing new signs of life in the present. To lure us into the future, the Spirit typically drops clues in the present. One of the questions I've been asking people is this. What new graces of the present time are you experiencing? What new opportunities are opening up for you? In other words, what new life is the Spirit giving you now? I've been astonished by people's responses. With a slightly apologetic look on their faces, people often confess they actually do not want everything to go back to normal.

- A young mother says she loves working at home because she's sleeping longer and better than she has in years.
- A working man says he hates the commute to the office and has no wish to go back to that daily grind.
- Another man says he's glad he's not frenetically running around anymore, being crazy busy with all the stuff he used to try to do.
- A woman says the technology of video calls is prompting people to listen to each other more carefully, simply because they know if they interrupt, other people won't hear them. Video calls only allow one person at a time to speak.

¹ See *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, 3rd ed. (Fortress, 1992).

- A retired man discovers he actually likes Zoom worship services better. Why? Because the technology is forcing pastors, worship leaders, and others to be more thoughtful and disciplined about what they say and what they do. Instead of disorganized sermons and worship services that go too long, Zoom worship is smoother, simpler, and easier to follow.
- Some of you may find this hard to believe, but I've even heard a few people say they love having a break from the weekly struggle of standing around the fellowship hall with no one to talk to, or if they do have someone to talk to, not knowing what to talk about.

Like these people, perhaps you too don't want everything to go back to normal. The biblical witness suggests that the Holy Spirit doesn't want everything to go back to normal either.

This week, I encourage you to keep your eyes open. Look for the graces of now, for the new opportunities that the Spirit may be opening up for you. Look for what makes you feel alive and hopeful. Look for the Spirit of Life.