

"The Spirit of Lent – Why Believe?"

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This evening we continue our Lenten series of reflections on the Apostles' Creed. These time-honored phrases define the fundamentals of our faith and it is rather inspiring to think about the fact that Christians have been speaking these words since the 2nd century AD. Any words that survive that long, spoken so often by so many, surely deserve our thought and attention.

Tonight we contemplate the statement "**I believe in the Holy Spirit.**" What do we believe about the Holy Spirit? Who is the Holy Spirit? I think it is fair to say that the Holy Spirit is often the forgotten person of the Trinity. Most of our prayers, most of our sermons, most of our devotional reflections are focused on Jesus. Jesus, Jesus...what would Jesus do?

I'm reminded of the story of the Sunday School teacher who showed her pre-school class a picture of the squirrel. She asked, "*what is this?*" One little boy who obviously had been to many Sunday School classes responded, "*Well, it really looks like a squirrel, but to be safe, I'm going to say it's Jesus.*" It's certain that he would never say, "It's the Holy Spirit."

The Nicene Creed adds a little bit of definition and understanding when it states that the Holy Spirit is the "*lord and giver of life, proceeding from the Father and Son and like the Father and the Son, to be worshipped and glorified.*" Do we faithfully worship and glorify the Spirit just as we do the Father and Son? You don't have to answer. I think we know the answer.

Many of us would be able to provide a good catechism answer to the question, "**Who is the Holy Spirit?**" We have been taught that the Holy Spirit is the moving force of God's presence in the world. The Spirit hovered over the waters at the creation. It is the Spirit of God that makes Baptism more than just washing with water. It is the Spirit of God that plants the seed of faith within the human heart. It is the Spirit of God that waters and nourishes that seed through Word and Sacrament so that our faith grows and produces abundant fruit, reflecting the light of Christ into the world. It is the Spirit of God that enables us to receive bread and wine and trust that in some mysterious way we truly receive His body and blood, assuring us that it is given and shed for the remission of my sin. As the creed says it, "*He is the Lord and Giver of life.*"

If we really believe any of the articles of our faith, that God is truly the Creator of heaven and earth... that Jesus Christ was truly virgin born and fathered by God that his death on a cross is the all-sufficient ransom for the sins of the world, that His resurrection guarantees our own resurrection to eternal life. If we believe any these mind-boggling, logic-defying ideas then it is clear that the Holy Spirit, the lord and giver of life, has been at work within you.

As Luther says it so powerfully in his catechism, *"I believe that I cannot by own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctifies and keeps me in the faith.*

Anyone can memorize and recite the Apostles Creed. But if these words are more than just an assortment of abstract theological concepts, if they breathe life and hope and joy within your heart, then you know that the Spirit of God is at work within you. And you can thank, praise and honor Him, worship and glorify Him, just as you do the Father and the Son.

But, as I said, many of us can articulate these ideas. I'm not plowing new ground here. Knowing and believing these things, we can resonate with the words of John's Gospel. Jesus speaks, *"I pray the Father, and He will give you another Counselor, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive because it neither sees Him or knows Him, You know Him for he dwells with you, and will be in you."* Indeed, He does. Thanks be to God.

But allow me to take you back, way back in the O.T, to the land of Moriah to try to bring some fresh life and meaning to this statement, **I believe in the Holy Spirit...to get in touch with the Spirit of Lent.**

You know the story well. **Abraham and Sarah** are well up in years. Their childlessness has been the source of bitterness and frustration, but at last there is the promise of a son. At last Sarah bore him a son, Isaac, the apple of Abraham's eye... the delight of his heart...the one through whom he would be the father of a great nation. But now, beyond credibility, beyond any sensibility, God asks Abraham to take his son Isaac up to the land of Moriah and kill him, sacrifice him on a crude altar of stone. How can this make any sense? What kind of a God would give a man a son and then ask him to kill him?

When Martin Luther commented on this text he said he could not have been an observer of this event, much less a participant. Rather, he said, he would have to stay at the bottom of the mountain with the rest of the donkeys because he could not fathom what it all

meant. What kind of a God? That's a question you've heard others speak. Perhaps you've spoken it yourself. " *What kind of a God?*"

**Martin Marty**, prolific Christian writer and historian, in the months following the death of his wife, wrote a book entitled, "*A Cry of Absence, Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*" He wrote about **summery spirituality and wintery spirituality**. He said "summertime spirituality" is the optimistic, bubbly variety that sees goodness in everything. Everything is positive. It is the kind of religion that is proclaimed by TV evangelists." Come to Jesus and everything will be wonderful". And preached in not a few churches, the kind that repeats endlessly and mindlessly, God loves you and I love you. Love makes the world go around.

**Wintery spirituality**, on the other hand, faces the troubles of life, the pain, the deaths, the difficulties, and struggles with them. The wintery type of faith does not constantly paste on a plastic smile and say " everything is fine." Rather, it grieves, it mourns, it groans, and it even sometimes fights with God. Yet, it does so with faith. It knows that "*in everything God works for good*" but it does not pretend to know how that can be understood in the face of events that don't seem good, but horrific. Wintery faith affirms Paul's words, "*nothing can separate us from the love of God*" but it doesn't sugarcoat or gloss over the others words of that passage from Romans 8, hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death.

**The Holy Spirit is the one who provides us with a wintery spirituality.**

Who is there among us who has not walked with Abraham, at least part of the way, up that rugged mountain asking, "What *kind of a God?*" Why did my child die? Why does my friend suffer with this dread disease? Why has my spouse left me? Why can't I find work? What kind of a God? These are the questions of winter that cut through the heart like an icy wind.

**You can watch Oprah and get a full dose of summery spirituality, but if your faith is to be equipped for winter**, you need to pray, "*Come, Holy Spirit, fill me up with a hope, a faith that will not shrink, though pressed by many a foe. That will not tremble on the brink of poverty or woe.*"

**We know the rest of the story...**how Isaac trudged up Mt. Moriah with a bundle of sticks for the fire....how he looked into his father's eye with a wistful, burning question, "*We have sticks and fire, but where is lamb for sacrifice?*" We can see Abraham turn his face away, unable to answer. We see the glint of the sun on a blade. We can see him raise the knife in the ultimate, anguished moment of trusting obedience. And we breathe

the sigh of relief when the ram is seen caught in the thicket. God's care, God's love is present, but what an ordeal, what a winter Abraham and Isaac had to endure!

**It is the Holy Spirit that points us** toward another moment when the sky is darkened and the winds of winter howl, when another young man walks up a mountain carrying not a few sticks and fire, but carrying the thick beam of a cross. He is obedient to His father who has asked that he make the ultimate sacrifice, that this first born son, this only begotten son, the apple of his father's eye, would become the lamb of God, the sacrifice that takes away the sin of the world, your sin and mine.

This is the Spirit of Lent. The Spirit who prepares us for the winter of life by pointing toward the Son, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Come Holy Spirit, fill us up. Amen.