

HOLY SPIRIT
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1ST MARSHALL
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The Holy Spirit

Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

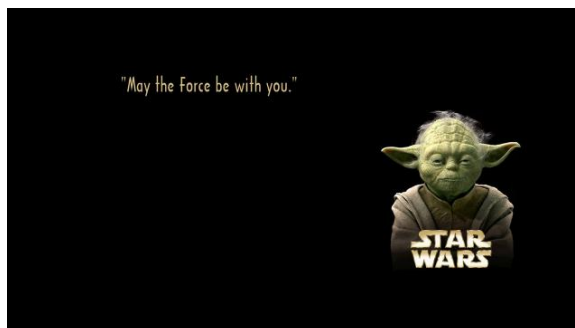
So...what do you all know about the Holy Spirit? Some have referred to it as the “quiet” member of the trinity, while others call it the least-understood part of the trinity... And yet, at the same time, it’s never been so popular in our country to talk publically about spirituality.

In fact, it still sometimes happens in a conversation with someone who doesn’t know me. When they discover that I’m a pastor, they’ll say something like, “Well, I’m spiritual but not religious...”

So you would think that if it’s acceptable to talk about being *spiritual*, we’d have a better handle on talking about the work of the Holy Spirit. So here are a few public references to the Spirit – or spiritual power – in our media.



Anyone recognize her? This is Sarayu as the Holy Spirit in the movie, **The Shack**. This next one’s going to be a real challenge...



Dumb joke that you've all heard before: Anyone know how can you tell who are Lutherans at a Star Wars movie? Whenever a character says, *May the force be with you!* – all the Lutherans reply: *And also with you!!!*

What is *the force* if it's not a spiritual manifestation of power??



Finally, you all know this one – it's young Harry Potter who discovers that he has spiritual powers that are essential in the grand battle between good and evil.

All three examples share a similar sort of platform about spiritual power: it's tangible, in the way that these people seem to be able to touch it, tap it, or turn to it in times of need. Or, at the very least they can see, or perceive spiritual power at work in their lives...in very worldly sorts of ways.

But is that true for the way the **Holy Spirit** works in our lives?

Let's take a look at the biblical witness about God's Spirit – and for that we'll start at the very beginning...literally Genesis 1, verses 1 and 2.

In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters...



I love this passage for a number of reasons...

This pre-creation situation is portrayed as a dark, watery, chaos. The Hebrew words that describe it are *tohu va bohu* (toe-hoo vaw bow-hoo) – which can mean either **without form and void** as it says in our bible verse, or it could also mean **confusion and emptiness**. Isn't that great? Before God speaks – Creation is **without form and void, confusing and empty**.

This unsettling pre-life state manifests everything that we human beings abhor: it exposes all of our most striking vulnerabilities. Here's the scenario it invites us to imagine:

You are shipwrecked...
in the middle of the ocean...
on a dark stormy night...
with no help in sight...and
You cannot see **an-y-thing** –

neither the **waves** from *above* that threaten to **beat** you, nor whatever's *below* the surface that might want to **eat** you.

You're doing everything possible to stay afloat, but the cold water starts to sap your strength...even as your breathing becomes labored and shallow... *tohu va bohu* indeed!

<https://theexplanation.com/tohu-va-bohu-signifies-confusion-and-void-a-horrible-state-to-be-in/>

And yet...even in that cauldron of complete confusion, our Creator is present...for we're **also** told that *a wind from God swept over the face of the deep*.

Now, the Hebrew word used here for wind is *ruah*...which can mean either **wind**, or **spirit**, or **breath**.

Hmm...which of those options do you like the best? Was it **wind**, **spirit** or **breath** from God that swept over the face of the deep...???

I'm going to go with **breath** – for this reason: in the very next sentence, God speaks...

Now, God, of course, is able to do anything God wants...but you and I cannot imagine another person or being speaking...without taking a breath...spirit, wind, breath...

Thus begins God's symphony of Creation: God breathes and speaks the Word, *Let there be light!* – and...



...there is Light!!

Then God (the Creator) breathes (the Holy Spirit) and speaks, (as Isaac preached so well last week), *the Word that was in the beginning* which is Christ, through whom God then says, Let there be...air, fish, dry land, plants, animals... Everything evolves from that first creative word – working toward God's ultimate goal: creating people – in God's image, no less!

Now, in the second chapter of Genesis, we see the same principle at work. But here the image of God is not as some all-powerful being creating worlds simply by speaking the Word, but as a sort-of **farmer** God (in his overalls?) tending to one particular task – creating human beings and the environment in which they could thrive.

We're told that God first forms a man from the dust of the ground then *breathes into his nostrils the breath of life*...

Next God plants a garden, creates a host of animals, and finally takes one of Adam's ribs and forms from it the first woman...



I have another couple of bad jokes for you: **Did you know that the world's first computer can be traced back to Adam and Eve?**

It was an *apple* but with extremely limited memory - just **1 byte**. And then...everything *crashed!*

Here's my last one (I promise!): **Adam and Eve...**were the very first people...to **not** read Apple's *terms and conditions!!!*

God breathes, speaks the Word, and life is created...

God breathes into a pile of dirt and humanity is born...

So there is this beautifully intimate connection between God breathing and speaking, as a generative act of creation...God is the Creator of life. Yet we also believe that God breathes and speaks a life-affirming blessing of re-creation over and over again in our lives. Here's what I mean...

Fast forward to the New Testament, specifically near the end of the Gospel of John. On that first Easter Day, Mary has run to the disciples to share her story that Jesus is alive...

Now John does not say what the disciples' reactions are to this amazing news... But in Luke's Gospel, the author pulls no punches – he simply says, “But these words seemed to (the men) an idle tale...” Much later that day, after evening has fallen, the disciples remain hidden behind locked doors...



They're fearful that the soldiers might still be looking for them,
 -that Rome's thirst for blood might not yet be sated,
 -that *out there* are still enemies of Jesus,
 -people eager to crucify his followers and finally be done with all that
 Messiah nonsense.

All of this drama...creates a beautifully contrasting word-picture: Jesus, who was dead and buried, locked in a tomb, is now alive and free. The disciples, who are alive and "free" are hiding in fear behind locked doors – yet they are as good as dead to the world...

But that's when Jesus appears...when they're at their weakest...and we're told, he breathes on the disciples and gives them the Holy Spirit...

Now, I'm not really sure what that means, what actually happened, what it looked and sounded like: he may have stood back and whooooooo - blew on all of them at the same time. However, one theologian likes to imagine instead that Jesus embraced each and every person there – holding them close, and in that way breathing on them the breath of the Spirit...



Either way, the disciples receive the Holy Spirit...and aexactly what that means they have yet to discover, but it does **not** mean that they can now somehow harness the power of the Spirit to accomplish their wants and wishes, their programs and plans...

In fact, the truth about the Holy Spirit's power in the disciples, (and in you and me as well!) is the very opposite of that worldly, tangible power that we so covet.

The Apostle Paul once was craving a similar thing – a blessing from the Spirit to remove some struggle he called a *thorn in his side* – three times, we're told, he prayed about it, and three times the Lord simply says, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness* (2 Corinthians 12:7-9).

My grace is sufficient...for my power is made perfect in weakness...

How would that sit with you if you were the one to whom God said, *My grace is sufficient, for my power is made perfect in weakness*. In other words, the Lord seems to be saying that the only way we can sense God's power is if we are **weak**...

...which is not a very good selling point if we're supposed to be out in the world bringing people to God, right?

We abhor being weak. We work **hard** to *disguise* our vulnerabilities. In fact, we live in fear of people discovering exactly how helpless we sometimes feel...

-So what does that mean and how does it work?

-How is God's grace sufficient for us?

-And how is it that the Spirit helps us in our weakness?

-How, when we know that we're weak, how can we be strong...?

Well, another of my favorite bible passages comes from the 8th chapter of Romans where Paul addresses this very issue (read twice).

*The Spirit, he says, helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.*
(Romans 8:26)

A family in a congregation I once served went through a horrible tragedy. The young husband-and-father died in a sudden accident leaving behind his grieving widow and their children.

After the shock of her husband's sudden and sad death wore off, the woman became very angry with God. She refused to pray – couldn't pray – couldn't worship – could not find peace...

After many, many conversations on this subject, I once asked her, ***Do you...ever sigh?*** She rolled her eyes at me like I was an idiot and said, ***I sigh all the time!!!***

Well, I said to her, I don't want you to get mad at me for possibly ruining your anger at God, but I want you to listen to these verses from Paul:

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes
with sighs too deep for words.*

Then I told her, Every time you sigh, God's Spirit is helping your spirit pray...and that's good enough for God right now.

She kind of stared daggers at me for a minute...and then she shook her head...and sighed...and nodded...

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness...

God's Spirit gives us life – and then God's Spirit re-affirms that gift every day of our lives...especially when we are at our weakest...

The Spirit is present in the word shared at a Baptism, when a person is claimed by God as the Lord's beloved child.

The Spirit is present in the words of the Lord's Supper, when Jesus feeds us his body and blood. According to Martin Luther, the two most important words in the Lord's Supper are two of the smallest: FOR and YOU. When Jesus says, Take, eat and drink, this is my body, this is my blood, given and shed FOR YOU for the forgiveness of sins, that makes it personal, doesn't it?

The Spirit tends us and cares for us all the days of our lives...but not just for the sake of our lives – as if we were God's **only** prized children.



The Spirit breathes on us...to give us life...

...even as the Spirit breathes on us...to set us on fire and send us out into the world to bless others' lives with the good news of Jesus Christ and his loving gift of grace for all people.

So...we come to worship to get filled up spiritually so that we can go and fulfill our calling as servants of Christ out in the world... What does that look like? Well, I guess it kinda depends on what type of Christian we are...

If we see ourselves as the only truly Spirit-filled folks, we'll leave here and demonstrate to the people of Marshall how holy we are – saying the right words, reading the right books, seeing only the good movies, and shunning anyone who's a sinner...as *perfect examples of how people of God are meant to live...OR*

If we're Prosperity Christians, we'll leave here and demonstrate to the people of Marshall how holy we are by pointing to our beautiful homes, our successful careers, and our bank accounts as proof that we are *perfect examples of how people of God are meant to live...*

If we self-identify as politically Liberal or Conservative Christians – we’ll leave here and associate ONLY with people who think-and-believe like us, and we’ll vilify those who don’t...as *perfect examples of how people of God are meant to live...*

However, if, in fact, we are disciples of Jesus Christ, we will leave here embracing and putting to work First Lutheran’s mission statement... Read it with me:



See the highlighted words INVITE and ALL?

Now listen to the following facts from a survey about your average congregation (which is a pretty good picture of us!).

One study shows that 82% of people who do not worship are likely to attend church if a friend, co-worker, neighbor or family member invites them.

Let’s pause here a second and restate these numbers. More than 8 out of 10 people who do not belong to a congregation said they would come to church if they were invited.

Now, take a guess at the percentage of congregational members who actually invite non-worshipping people to church. Any guesses??

2 percent...<https://factsandtrends.net/2013/04/08/just-ask/>

Couple that with the stats from another survey from a while ago. It revealed that folks will be drawn to a congregation for various reasons. About 3% will come to church:

- to hear a sermon,
- to enjoy the music,
- or because of a youth or education or social program.

However, over 70 per cent will come to church because someone they knew invited them...

The Holy Spirit did not come to the disciples to fill their little spiritual cups so that they could be happy in their own little group.

In fact, it's exactly the opposite. When the Holy Spirit poured itself out over those first followers of Jesus, they were immediately sent out in among the people to speak about Jesus' gift of life, and love, and grace – even in languages they had no idea they knew how to speak!!!

So imagine what the Holy Spirit can – and will do – with the likes of me and you, if we're able to set aside our self-consciousness, our nervousness, our hesitancy in talking about our faith publicly. Truly, the Spirit sends us out to listen to our neighbors and speak of God's grace. Actually, as someone once said, *the fact that God gave us two ears and one mouth means that we're supposed to do twice as much listening as speaking!!*

But this is where the Spirit shines – this is the Holy Spirit's forte – taking people who are scared, weak and withdrawn, as good as dead to the world...taking them – us! – and filling us with God's blessing of a forgiven life. That's how you and I are called to celebrate the power of the Holy Spirit active in our lives! Let's say our mission statement together one more time:



**We are believers seeking
to *invite all* into
the caring, sharing and
growing ways of Christ.**

Thanks be to God. Amen!