

When the Spirit Comes

A SERMON BY THE REV. RICHARD W. NEAL

BASED ON PROVERBS 8:1-4, 22-31 AND JOHN 16:12-15

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When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth. (John 16:13a)

THE LIFE AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS ARE NOT ENOUGH as we wrestle with the complexities of life in this world. We must remain open to new revelations of the Spirit as we continue to give shape and expression to our living faith.

That's what the early church learned. In the last years of the first century the church was in profound crisis. Jesus was gone, and with the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple, the world in which he lived and taught, the world they had all grown up in, was also gone. And the church wondered: Was the gospel Jesus announced for his day also good news for their day? And how did it apply to situations that Jesus never addressed by his teaching or example?

Those questions might be our questions. The world in which most of us grew up is gone, and sometimes I hear people ask if the world is ever going to be "normal" again. Addressing that question a few years ago, the late Joseph Lowery pointed out that the post-9/11 world we are experiencing today *is* normal – a new normal. "The challenge to the church is not to like it," he said, "but to love it." But how do we love a world we've never before experienced? How do we manifest God's love in situations about which Jesus never whispered a hint?

We do it by relying on the Holy Spirit. In saying goodbye to his friends, Jesus pointed them toward a future when he would not be with them, at least not in the way they had experienced so far. But they would have something else, he said: the Holy Spirit. And when the Spirit comes, he said, they would be led into new revelations of truth that he had not shared with them. God's revelation, he said, will continue after he is gone, and it will lead them to deeper, more complete understandings of an eternal truth they had previously been unable to grasp.

"Never place a period," comedienne Gracie Allen once said, "where God has placed a comma." God has more to say to us than God said through the life and teachings of Jesus. With the coming of the Spirit, God's revelation would continue to guide Jesus' friends into *all* the truth, not merely the partial truth Jesus had expressed.

All of us are reminded of that, I hope, by the reburial last week of Nicolaus Copernicus, the sixteenth-century astronomer who proposed the theory that Earth is not the center of the universe but that it orbits the sun as one of several planets. His theory was so offensive to the common understanding of God in those days that the Roman church condemned him as a heretic, but after nearly 500 years the church last week reburied him as a hero. Copernicus did not proclaim a new truth; he revealed a truth that had existed from the beginning of creation and that, up to that time, had been unrecognized.

That's what the Spirit does. It leads us into more of the truth as we mature in our ability to grasp more of it. The Spirit continues to lead us into new and deeper understandings of God's revelation, and these understandings may be very different from what we've known before. But we need these new revelations if we are to cope with new information about the world and if we are to deal with new situations in life that are profoundly different from anything we've known before.

As part of the industrialized world, we've built a highly developed lifestyle on a partial and undeveloped truth. The partial truth is that Earth's natural resources can provide fuel to sustain the lifestyle we've chosen. The deeper and more complete truth, of which we've been reminded since the recent oil spill began in the Gulf of Mexico, is that we are stepping dangerously beyond the limits of our wisdom. To support the lifestyle we've chosen, we are unleashing forces we don't understand and cannot control. The more we learn to do, the more we risk harming the creation into which God has placed us as stewards.

The good news is, wisdom still speaks to us. The wisdom with which God worked at the beginning of creation still takes her stand at the crossroads and in the public squares of our communities, and still speaks to us – can we hear it? There at the crossroads she invites us, as Jeremiah wrote, to "ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies" and to walk in that good way (Jer. 6:16).

The way to live in this world, whole and complete, is not to be found in science and technology; it's to be found in our relationship with God, with one another, and with all creation. Our efforts to plumb the depths of Earth for fuel for our lifestyle must be balanced by our diligence in plumbing the depths of our hearts for the wisdom that will support true life. And that's where God's Spirit helps us, the Spirit that is given to the true Church, the body of Christ, "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, . . . the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord" (Isa. 11:2).

We have problems to solve in the Gulf of Mexico and all around this post-9/11 world. We also have the Holy Spirit, who will teach us everything and guide us into all the truth we need for life that is truly abundant (John 14:26; 16:13; 10:10).