

## **"Holy Ghost Stories"**

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Acts 2:1-8, 14-21 • John 14:15-26

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Throughout time, people have always been interested in the idea of spirits or ghosts roaming about the earth, sometimes visible but most of the time not. There are even references to ghosts that date to ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia. Most of the time, these ghosts are thought to be the disembodied spirits of someone who has died. For whatever reason, the person's spirit has remained on earth, either because of something they did in life or looking for revenge.

One person in particular who was especially concerned with ghosts was Sarah Winchester. The Winchester family made a huge fortune manufacturing the very popular Winchester Repeating Rifle in the 1800s. Sarah and her husband William lived in New Haven, Connecticut and enjoyed the very best of New England society. That is, until their infant daughter died suddenly in 1866. Mrs. Winchester went into severe depression from which she never recovered.

Things got worse for her 15 years later when her husband died of Tuberculosis at the age of 46. According to the tradition, Mrs. Winchester sought the help of a spiritualist or medium who told her that her family and her fortune was being haunted by people who had been killed by Winchester rifles, including American Indians and Civil War soldiers. The spiritualist told Sarah that to appease the spirits, she would have to move west and build a great house for them. As long as construction of the house never ceased, Mrs. Winchester could rest assured that her life was not in danger.

And that's exactly what she did. She packed her belongings and headed to California where she found some property near San Jose and began building a sprawling mansion. She hired construction workers and construction went on 24 hours a day for the next 38 years. The total for construction is estimated to have been about \$5.5 million, which would be equivalent to about \$71 million today.

This house was no ordinary house, though. To confuse the spirits, there were stairways and doors that lead to nowhere or to steep drop-offs. In all there are 160 rooms in the house and it's said that Sarah never slept in the same room two nights in a row, to confuse the spirits.

This morning in our study of the Apostles' Creed we are looking at the phrase, "I believe in the Holy Ghost." I suspect that for many people, when they hear that phrase from the Creed they get the image in their minds of the kind of ghosts that Sarah Winchester feared.

But that's not at all what we're talking about. The word "ghost" in the Creed is an Old English word that means "spirit." Today we are more likely to talk about the Holy Spirit than the Holy Ghost. So what do we mean when we say, "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

The words of the Creed don't give us a lot of help here. All it says about the Holy Spirit is "I believe." So what is it that we believe? Who is the Holy Spirit?

That question actually gives us some insight into the Holy Spirit. A 2009 survey of Americans who consider themselves

to be Christian asked questions about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, Satan and demons. What was shocking from this survey is that 58% of the people said that the Holy Spirit is "a symbol of God's power or presence but is not a living entity." In other words, they believed that the Holy Spirit was merely an energy or a way of experiencing God's power. But over and over the Bible is clear that the Holy Spirit is a *who* and not a *what*.

Jesus makes this clear in our passage from John 14. In verse 16 he says, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another* Helper...the Spirit of truth." In this verse we find one of the clearest biblical descriptions of the doctrine of the Trinity - the idea that God exists eternally in three "persons," God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Throughout the Bible the Holy Spirit is said to have a will and understanding, he is said to teach, to think, to desire, and to love. In Acts 13 we find a group of Christians worshipping in the church in Antioch and verse 2 says, "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'"

The Scottish theologian T.F. Torrance said, "The Spirit is not just something divine...emanating from [God]. In giving us his Holy Spirit God gives us nothing less than himself." What the Bible tells us, and what two thousand years of Christian experience confirm, is that the Holy Spirit is fully God, equal with God the Father and God the Son. We also see that the Holy Spirit has always existed. At the very beginning of the Bible, Genesis 1:2 says, "The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face

of the waters." The Holy Spirit has been involved in every act of God.

So now that we know *who* the Holy Spirit is, we need to look at what the Spirit *does*. Verse 26 of our passage describes two things that the Holy Spirit will do. Jesus says, "He will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you."

The word "Spirit" in the Bible comes from the Greek word *pneuma* and the Hebrew word *ruach*, both of which mean "breath, wind, or spirit." Our reading from Acts describes the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost like a "mighty rushing wind." It would be accurate in one sense to say that the Holy Spirit is the "breath" of God. The idea is that it is the Spirit who breathes life into creation. This is where we get our word "inspire," which literally means "to breathe into." As we saw in Genesis 1, the Holy Spirit was involved in creation and is still involved in keeping creation going. Genesis 2:7 tells us, "the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature."

When Jesus says that the Spirit will remind the Apostles everything he had told them, he's talking about the Spirit guiding the writing of the New Testament Scriptures, just as he guided, or inspired, the writing of the Old Testament.

Another image we get of the Holy Spirit from our reading in Acts is that he is like fire and one of the products of fire is light. One of the important tasks of the Holy Spirit is to shine the light of truth. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would "teach you all things." Without the help of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures would just be words. First Corinthians 1:18 says, "the word of the cross is foolishness to

those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." When we read or hear the Scriptures, they make sense to us when the Holy Spirit enlightens us, teaches us, and shows us the truth. That truth that we see in the Bible is that Jesus is fully God and that by his death and resurrection he has forgiven our sins and restored our relationship with God.

The third thing we see about the work of the Holy Spirit in John 14 is the name "Helper" in verse 15. The Greek word is *paraclete* and it is sometimes translated as "helper," "comforter," or "counselor." The word literally means "called to someone's side" In secular writings it was used to describe someone who comes along side another to represent him in court. In other words, kind of like an attorney.

This may be a better illustration. On Friday I had the opportunity to attend a rehearsal dinner for the wedding that was here yesterday evening. The dinner was at Hester's in the Art Museum. If you've been there you know that there are large windows that overlook the ship channel and one of the neat experiences is watching the large ships come in and out of the port. While we were there, a ship came into the bay and before we even saw the ship we knew it was there because a tugboat went out of the port to meet it. The job of the tugboat is to guide that large ship safely into the port and up to the dock. The Holy Spirit is like that tugboat. He comes alongside us to inspire, and illuminate, and guide us safely to Christ, pushing and pulling us when we get off course.

The real question for us today is "how do we experience the Holy Spirit in our lives?" What difference does it make to us knowing the person and work of the Holy Spirit? Basically there

are three areas where we most directly experience the work of the Spirit. I've already mentioned reading Scripture. When we read the Bible we find God speaking most directly to us. And I can assure you that the Holy Spirit will never speak to us personally in a way that contradicts what He has already said in his Word.

The second area is prayer. I don't know about you, but there are times when I feel like I don't even know how to pray. In Romans 8:26, the Apostle Paul writes, "we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words." God the Holy Spirit steps in and takes our poor attempts at prayer and intercedes for us and at the same time brings us into the presence of Christ.

The third area that we most experience the Holy Spirit in our life is worship. In fact, without the work of the Holy Spirit we are not even able to worship. It's by the Holy Spirit that Jesus gathers us into the Church. The Holy Spirit creates worshippers by applying the saving work of Christ to our individual lives and revealing that to us. When we finally understand what Christ did for us on the cross we can't help but worship, not just on Sunday mornings at 11 a.m. but all the time.

When we *do* come together for corporate worship, that is a work of the Holy Spirit as well. I like the way one author put it: "Worship is a time when heaven and earth meet; it is a holy conversation between the Creator of heaven and earth and his redeemed creatures." He is involved in every aspect of our worship - in the reading, preaching and hearing of the Scriptures, in our prayers, spoken, silent and sung, and in

the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. From beginning to end, worship is the work of the Holy Spirit.

So then how could worship ever be boring? If our worship is a time when God meets us here, how do we *experience* that? I think the first thing we need to realize is that in the person of the Holy Spirit, God is already here at work. We don't have to wait for him to show up, he's already here. That means we're missing what he's doing. For us to experience the power of the Holy Spirit, we should come to worship *expecting* to see God at work.

As an example, when my daughter Robin was younger it seemed that every time she went somewhere she would find coins on the floor. Sometimes she would find pennies or nickels, sometimes quarters. Before long she had a jar that was filling up with money she had found. One of the reasons she was able to find the coins is that she went into the stores *expecting* to find money on the ground. The money was already there and most people never saw it because they weren't expecting to find money. But since she was expecting it, when she came across a coin she was prepared.

It's the same for our worship and our daily life. If we come expecting to see God at work transforming people's lives to be more like Christ, we will actually see him working and he will use us to work in each others' lives.

Let me conclude with this quote from Hughes Oliphant Old: "When we worship, having our minds enlightened by the Spirit, our lives cleansed by the Spirit, our wills moved by the Spirit, and our hearts warmed by the Spirit, then our worship is transformed from being a mere human work into being a divine work." My prayer is that we

would experience that here at First Presbyterian.

*Amen.*