

St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)
Christmas 1 – December 29, 2024
Luke 2:22-40 – The Holy Spirit at Christmas
Rev Peter Wagner

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Christmas, I have preached about the work of God the Father to send his only begotten Son, the Word made flesh, into the world to save us from our sins. Now today, I want to focus on how the whole Trinity is involved in Christmas, and especially the Holy Spirit.

So rejoice, Christmas has come! The Son of God is here! And even better, the entire Trinity is showering us with love, working in perfect harmony for the redemption of all mankind.

The whole Trinity is especially clear in the wonderful epistle reading for Christmas Day, from Titus chapter 3. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

All three persons are here. God our Savior – the Triune God – he saved us. God the Father saved us by sending his own Son, offering him up in love for the world. He did not withhold his Son, his only Son, from us. And God the Son saved us by coming down from heaven. Being found in human form, he took on human flesh, and was obedient unto death, even death on a cross, so we might be justified by his grace and become heirs with him of eternal life.

And God the Holy Spirit saves us too. The Holy Spirit saves us, says Paul, in the church, through the washing of regeneration and renewal. He washes us in baptism, he renews us each day by forgiveness and his word, so we might inherit all the blessings of the Christ child.

Paul teaches the same thing in today's epistle, Galatians 4. God saves us by sending his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem us from condemnation of the law, in order to adopt you as his sons and heirs through baptism. He saves us in order to claim us as his own, so that by the Holy Spirit you may share in the inheritance of Christ, and call on God your Father.

“For because you are sons,” says Paul, “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”

So we see the whole Trinity at work in Christmas, and especially the Holy Spirit. Truly, the Holy Spirit is everywhere in the Christmas story. From the very beginning, the angel Gabriel announces that the Holy Spirit will come upon the virgin Mary, to conceive the Son of God in her womb, so that she is found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit is at work again, when Mary visits Elizabeth, and when Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cries out with a loud voice, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!” And Mary herself responds with words of holy inspiration, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

And then, when Jesus is born, his birth fulfills the great prophecy of Isaiah, that the Christ child will be anointed with the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.”

And now today, on this first Sunday after Christmas, when Mary and Joseph come to the temple with baby Jesus, they meet an old man, Simeon, filled with the Holy Spirit. Simeon knows from the Holy Spirit that he will not taste death before he has seen the Lord's Christ. So now, by the Spirit, he proclaims the Savior to everyone there, so all may recognize the Christ child by faith.

And filled with the Spirit, Simeon takes Jesus up in his arms and blesses God and speaks the joyous words which we know so well, the Nunc Dimittis, which we sing every Sunday after communion: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

It is the Holy Spirit who revealed these things to Simeon, that this baby in his arms is the Christ. In Jesus, Simeon sees the Lord with his own eyes, “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace.” For no one can say that Jesus is Lord, except in the Holy Spirit.

And the Holy Spirit also reveals to Simeon that this baby is salvation for all nations. This baby who has come to the temple to perform the sacrifices of the law will become the perfect sacrifice to fulfill the demands of the law. He will sacrifice the temple of his body, he will die on the cross for the sins of the world, and a sword will pierce through Mary's heart also.

But now, the question is: Will you believe the testimony of the Holy Spirit about Jesus? Will you believe what Simeon proclaimed: salvation in the Son of God? Will you take hold of the Christ child by faith? Or will you resist the Holy Spirit?

Let the Holy Spirit bring you to Jesus. Give us receptive hearts, O God, so we never resist you!

Those who resist the Holy Spirit are like another Christmas story, a much darker one than the story of Simeon, but one that we cannot ignore. For on the very first day after Christmas, December 26th each year, the church commemorates the death of Saint Stephen, the first martyr to give his life for the testimony of the newborn Christ.

And in the account of Stephen in Acts chapter 7, we read on the day right after Christmas about the Holy Spirit, in a much darker context. For Stephen, like Simeon, preached about the Lord's Christ. And he sternly warned the angry mob, "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute? And they killed those who announced beforehand the coming of the Righteous One, whom you have now betrayed and murdered, you who received the law as delivered by angels and did not keep it."

Yet instead of repenting of their wickedness, these men kept resisting the Spirit. They ground their teeth at Stephen and cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. And then they cast him out of the city and stoned him to death.

But while they were stoning him, Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. And with his eyes filled with heavenly light, he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."

Fill us with your Spirit like Stephen, O God, that we may see Jesus our Savior, born for us! And protect us from all unbelief. Do not let us reject this baby in the manger! Bring us to repent of our evil deeds and receive Jesus always by faith!

It's sobering to realize that we can resist the Holy Spirit. Because the Holy Spirit works through resistible means. He works by means of the word of God, preached by prophets like Simeon and Stephen, to point you to Jesus, to lead you to the Christ child.

And the Holy Spirit uses means like the sacraments. Like baptism, which washes away our sins and brings us into adoption as sons of God with Christ. And the Spirit uses means like the Lord's Supper, to apply the forgiving blood of Jesus to us as often as we eat and drink it.

The Holy Spirit does all these things through the church, the place where he chooses to bring his means of grace to you.

But his means can be resisted. We can easily despise preaching and God's word. We can easily take his sacraments for granted and ignore the precious gifts of forgiveness in the blood of the Christ child. And thus we would turn away from the Holy Spirit, and from the whole Triune God, away from God our Savior. All this is scary, but do not be afraid.

Thanks be to God, who never gives up on his adopted children. Thanks be to the Holy Spirit, who calls us every day of our lives by the Gospel, who enlightens us and sanctifies us through his word and sacrament, in order to keep us with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. He will not allow his chosen children to resist the Gospel. For the Holy Spirit is committed to his baptized children. We are baptized into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and God our Savior does not forsake those who bear his holy name.

So come, Holy Spirit. Work in our hearts, that we may believe with Simeon and Stephen and all the saints. Teach us to call upon God our Father and confess Jesus Christ as Lord. Never let unbelief or sin or anything in all creation separate us from your love in Christ Jesus. Instead, strengthen us, Holy Spirit, so that we may die and depart this world in peace, and enter at last into the courts of heaven, to worship and praise you, our saving Triune God. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus to life everlasting. Amen.