

11/21/21 WORSHIP SERVICE

OPENING – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Welcome to Alexanderwohl! It's been a blessing to hear the voices of Elbiata Singers. We welcome them and are grateful for what they are adding to our time of worship this morning. We'll look forward to hearing three more pieces from them later on in the service.

Today is our final Sunday of our 10 week (11 with the special Sunday with Cynthia Neufeld Smith) series on Anabaptist Essentials. This has been a time to strengthen our understanding of our core values and teaching as we discover the Spirit's leading in our future.

Our final theme is the Holy Spirit, who is the essential ingredient in everything we do.

It is hard to believe that we are entering the holiday season!

This Thursday at 10 am, we will take up our tradition of a Thanksgiving morning service. The organ prelude will begin at 9:50. After a year of challenge and loss we also have reasons for gratitude.

It will be based on Psalm 46 – “The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge”. Brief reflections will be offered by Steve Banman, Cambry Duerksen (through her art), a litany written by Judy Unruh and words from the pastors.

CALL TO WORSHIP (SEE BULLETIN)

INVOCATION PRAYER (ADAPTED FROM VT 877, NEILL THAW)

Spirit of God,

Breathe into our individual lives and the life of this congregation.

Open our minds to what you would have us hear this morning. Let us know your abiding strength.

Come, Holy Spirit, enter our silences.

Come into the depths of our longing. Unmask our pretending.

Enter our trusting, enter our fearing, enter our letting go, and enter our holding back.

Come, Holy Spirit, embrace us and set us free. Amen

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

Judy Goertzen has asked for our prayers this morning. She has spent the week in Topeka with her mother, Liz Unruh as Liz has been in the hospital with heart issues. Judy, Tim, Nicole and Tia have been present through the week with Liz, along with Judy's sister Carol – they've had really wonderful family time together. They're waiting now for a placement to open at a place where Liz can receive hospice care.

Dear God we pray to you with grateful hearts. As we approach Thanksgiving this week we are aware, again, of the countless ways and reasons that we have to express our gratitude to you, our dependence on you. You are our Creator and the creator of all that is. You are our Redeemer, through the life and love of Jesus. You are our Sustainer, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As many of us gather with family and friends this week we pray for safe travel mercies. We pray for meaningful fellowship and time spent together. We offer deep gratitude, even as we also acknowledge deep pain and grief also in our lives – you are present with us, God through all of our life's experiences. We thank you for the harvest and the seasons that continue to unfold day after day, for the falling leaves and the chilly temperatures. Thank you for your wonders that are unusual – the lunar eclipse that took place the other night that happens only once every several hundred years! We're astounded by your creativity as we witness it in the universe.

We're grateful for the gift of poetry and music. We thank you for each member of Elbiata and for their gift of song that they're sharing with us this morning. Bless each singer – may they also receive a gift of gratitude and meaning as they sing.

We bring our prayers of petition to you, God. We ask you to continue to be with Judy and her mother Liz. Be with the whole family as they keep vigil together with laughter and tears, memories and the knowledge that their hope lies in you. Give them comfort – and especially Liz as she makes the transition from this life to the next. Give them peace. We pray for Bethesda – for Sara Hiebert and all who work and live there as well as the board. Continue to grant your wisdom, clarity of mind and also your peace as decisions are made. We pray for other long-term care facilities where those we know and love work and live – may your Spirit of compassion be felt and honored on behalf of our elders.

That same Spirit of compassion is needed, God in so many places, close to home and around the world. We pray for our black and brown brothers and sisters whose voices are not heard because of the color of their skin. Open the ears and the hearts of those who can't hear. Grant your Spirit of compassion and righteousness that your kingdom may be brought closer here on earth. We pray for those whose losses are unimaginable due to torrential rains and flooding along the west coast of the U.S. and Canada. We pray that hearts will open to them and give them the help they need in the face of losing homes and possessions. We pray for those who have left their homes out of fear for their lives and safety. There are immigrants and refugees world-wide, God – so many people at so many borders, waiting for compassion. Grant your wisdom and your light in those situations. Those people and those situations can all seem so far away and unrelated to us and our lives, but we know that everything and everyone is interconnected and that all humanity and creation is yours, so let our vision be broad, our hearts be wide and our faith commitments be deep for the care and keeping of your earth. Be with us now through the rest of this time of worship – may we be attentive to your Spirit as it moves in our midst and changes our hearts and minds. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYER OF DEDICATION – PASTOR LOIS

All that we have comes from you, O God. We dedicate these offerings of money back to you, with gratitude and hope that it will be used for the doing of your will. Amen.

The song, “Waterfall” may be a new one to some. It’s an upbeat, contemporary song of faith confession and calling. If you can pay attention to the words, you’ll be able to make a connection to the words from Luke that we’ll hear Glen Unrau read, right after the song.

SERMON - EMPOWERED BY THE SPIRIT – PASTOR CALEB

INTRO

Over the past months, we’ve talked about a number of core emphases of Anabaptism, which is the stream of Christian faith that we came out of.

You’ve no doubt noticed this graphic from our church bulletins, or the *Anabaptist Essentials* book. The three primary themes are: “Jesus is the center of our faith,” “Community is the center of our life,” and “Reconciliation is the center of our work” (and God’s work I’d add).

I don’t know if you noticed the Holy Spirit in the very middle of the spokes of the wheel. I am glad that Palmer Becker chose to close his book with this topic, and the way he positioned the Spirit on the graphic shows that the Spirit is the essential ingredient for everything else that we’ve talked about.

Of course, we don’t always know how to talk about the Spirit. What does that mean? You might associate the word “spirit” with ghosts. We are getting closer if you talk about a person’s “spirit” – meaning their core energy, or something central to who they are. We could say the same is true in talking about the “Spirit of God.”

While we are not terribly used to talking about the Spirit, Becker says we could learn something from Christians in the Global South who often tend to have vibrant faith expression with a strong emphasis on the Spirit.

I know what he is talking about from my experience in Honduras, as I’ve mentioned before. In the church I related to there, the Spirit showed up a lot in the songs they sang; words like: “*the Spirit of God falling over me,*” or “*[the Spirit] gives me power to overcome.*” This made sense, because most lived with poverty and a lot of problems, and their Christian lives were the one place they could feel a sense of their own power and agency.

I remember one time when Sister Eluvina, the pastor’s wife, was preaching. She was recalling her attitude before she became a Christian. “*Why do these churches need to be so loud?*” She asked. “*Is God deaf, that they have to make so much noise?*”

I was wondering the same thing, so I listened for her answer. But she gave none. When she became a Christian, she understood why you had to be loud. No need to explain; everyone else listening seemed to get it, except for me.

Yet I recall a time that everyone was praying out loud. It was so loud that I couldn’t hear the sound of my own voice, which made me feel less inhibited to freely pray out loud with the rest.

It was a very powerful experience of worshiping with others. The noise actually became like an all-absorbing silence.

I'll be the first to admit that I had and still have some questions about how they did things in this church. I learned that you can't idealize any group of people or church. We are all human. We also have different ways of experiencing the world.

I believe that God smiles on the diversity of the global church. Every church may have its problems, but the diversity of expressions of faith is not one of them.

If there is a way to sum up what Christians in other places might teach us, it is that we need a faith that is *experiential*. One where we are not just going through the motions because of being part of a sub-culture that does that, but because we have our unique way as a community and as individuals of encountering God's presence.

We need to honor God both with our minds, by thinking critically and clearly, as well as with our hearts and soul, with openness to God's untamable Spirit.

THE SPIRIT IN LUKE

We're going to look for the Spirit a little off-the-beaten path at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. The presence of the Spirit is littered throughout Luke and the companion volume of Acts. Often, we skip over these lines, especially when Jesus is the main subject.

Our scripture reading came from several shorter segments. By reading that way, hopefully you noticed how the Holy Spirit was the essential ingredient of the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

The Spirit is there as Jesus is baptized. The Spirit compels Jesus to spend 40 days of testing in the wilderness. Jesus returns in the power of the Spirit, and inaugurates his ministry by reading "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me" in the synagogue of his hometown.

I want us to look at these verses with an eye for what the Spirit is doing.

First, we have just two verses in Luke's Gospel about Jesus' baptism. Heaven opens up, which is both a sign that something apocalyptic is going to happen, and a signal of God's blessing through the one the Spirit descends upon.

It's a surprise for the Spirit to manifest bodily in the form of a dove, an ordinary creature that was a sign of God's renewed creation after the narrative of the flood in Genesis.

Jewish Rabbis believed that the Spirit of God basically departed from earth with the last of the prophets but on occasion God's voice spoke from heaven. This is exactly what we have in these simple words: "*You are my son, whom I love, in you I am well-pleased.*"

They are words from God addressed to Jesus. In Mark and Matthew, the words begin, "This is my son..." but in Luke's Gospel, we have them as Jesus would have heard them, addressed to him, before Jesus has even begun.

Jesus is loved and pleasing to God, *before* he has accomplished anything!

WILDERNESS

After his baptism, Jesus is “*filled with the Spirit.*”

In the next scene, Jesus is compelled into the desert wilderness by the Spirit. Mark uses the strongest language, saying that the Spirit “drove Jesus out” into the wilderness.

Luke has that Jesus was “led in the wilderness *in* the Spirit.” I like that, because it suggests that Jesus didn’t just go out by the directive of the Spirit, but was accompanied by the Spirit throughout the whole time.

Jesus spends forty days fasting, like Moses who fasted forty days on the Mountain of Sinai. After forty days, Jesus is hungry! Never mind the fact that it only takes me an hour after a skipped meal to feel hungry; we still have a picture of Jesus’ humanity.

The temptations strike the core of the kind of Messianic vocation Jesus will have. Jesus’ refusal to give in is what will define the character of his ministry, all the way to the cross.

MINISTRY IN GALILEE

When Jesus returns to Galilee from the desert, he goes “in the *power* of the Spirit.” Let’s remember that word *power*. This seems to be indicating something about the source of Jesus’ work.

Jesus gains fame and respect (so far!) and teaches in synagogues. When he goes to the synagogue in his hometown, Jesus reads stands up to read. They give him the scroll of Isaiah – we don’t know whether Jesus had a choice of biblical book.

But Jesus does locate the specific passage he wants to read from what is Isaiah 61 in our Bibles:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.*

Do you notice that? The Spirit shows up again! The passage from Isaiah is about how Spirit-infused work of the Anointed One is to evangelize good news to the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed.

We could spend much time going into what that all means. It shows God’s compassion for those who are suffering from social exclusion, exploitation, imprisonment, and emotional or spiritual isolation. The Good News is that *God cares*.

SPIRIT AS MISSING INGREDIENT

You might be thinking, “well, those stories are all about Jesus. Jesus is a special case. Of course, the Spirit of God was upon Jesus. That doesn’t mean any of this applies to ordinary people.”

Yet the book of Acts, part II of Luke makes it pretty clear that the Spirit was equally active in the beginnings of the church.

I come to a line from an early church teacher named Irenaeus: *“our Lord Jesus Christ, ... through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.”*¹

If Jesus needed the power and fullness of the Spirit, so will we. Sometimes the Holy Spirit is the missing ingredient. This is especially true of what I’ve heard others call a religion of “do better, try harder.”

It goes something like this:

You are a such a horrible person. You are so bad. It’s a good thing that God loves you. It’s lucky for you Jesus died on the cross to cover all your horrible sins. It’s amazing he didn’t need to die several times over. It’s a good thing God is merciful and gives grace to someone like you because you really need it.

But don’t get lazy. You better do better and try harder or else you are pressing your luck with God’s grace. Yep, do better, try harder. Do better, try harder.

It doesn’t work. And Mennonites can easily fall into this, because of our emphasis on things like service, giving selflessly, and faith being evident in our actions. You can’t sustain this unless you have the Spirit as a lifeline, as your source of resilience, strength, and inner authority.

When we baptize people in our church, we have used the phrase, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. May God baptize you with the Holy Spirit from above, giving you *power* to walk as a follower of Jesus.” The Spirit is our source of power and strength for transformation and living into our vocations.

I’m going to give a couple of humble suggestions for how we can seek not only a *Jesus-centered faith*, but also a *Spirit-filled* faith.

One of these is to simply invite the presence of the Spirit both in our individual lives and in the life of the church. That’s pretty simple. I’m not promising a Pentecost, or some kind of outcome we can control or manage. But just be intentional and cognizant of inviting the Spirit.

Secondly, we need personal practices to ground ourselves in God’s love and acceptance, with strength for the vocation God has for us.

It’s from a book by Ed Cizewski that I first noticed that these words Jesus hears – “You are my son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased” – are all *before* Jesus did anything in his ministry to merit them.

¹ Irenaeus of Lyons. (1885). [Irenæus against Heresies](#). In A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, & A. C. Coxe (Eds.), *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus* (Vol. 1, p. 526). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company.

Jesus hadn't yet withstood temptation in the desert, he hadn't yet healed anyone, he hadn't yet preached a killer sermon, or sparred with the Pharisees. We might say that Jesus is a special case, but I don't think it is any different with any of us.

Cyzewski then asks readers to picture themselves being on the receiving end of these words: "*You are my child, Whom I love, with you I am well pleased.*"

He writes, "you haven't shared the gospel, served a meal, visited a prison, ministered to the sick, or supported a single heartbroken person through loss or tragedy. You haven't proven yourself worthy of anything." ²

God is well-pleased with us, not because we have arrived— of course not! But because we simply are – we are God's children – and because God can see who we have the potential to become and delights in that already.

My adaptation of the words is simply "*You're my son, I love you, you're enough.*" Imagining God saying these words has been powerful for me, and I use them with the rhythm of my breathing when on a run, along with my response: "*you are my God, I love you, you are my strength.*"

Howard Thurman once said, "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive — and go do that, because what the world needs is people who have come alive."³

The problem is, we don't know what really makes us come alive, unless we find time to sit still, and listen to our own spirits, as well as the still, small voice of the capital S Spirit that will occasionally speak through the noise of all our own thoughts.

Different practices will be the right for different people. Jesus had his time in the desert as well as time retreating to pray.

Each of us needs times of rest and retreat to take us away from the busyness of daily life to open ourselves to an awareness of our own spirits and God's Spirit – without being able to control what we will experience.

Finally, we aim to seek the guidance and strength of the Spirit in everything we do in the life of the Church. This is the reason that our meetings typically begin with devotions or prayer, but it is natural, of course to quickly move to the mechanics of what we do without slowing down to ask the basic questions of *Who are we? Where is God? And What is the Spirit saying?*

About a month ago I mentioned that Pastor Lois and I would like to form a small team to organize small group opportunities to listen to one another and to the Spirit, as we discern who we will be as a church going forward. We have found our small team, and will have a fair bit of work to meet and create plans for how to do this important work.

² Cyzewski, Ed. *Flee, be silent, pray: ancient prayers for anxious Christians*. Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2019; page 42

³ Quoted in Rensberger, David. "Before the Doing is the Being." *Anabaptist World*. November 26, 2021, Vol. 2 No. 15

But this doesn't have to be a formal initiative either. There are small ways that we can remind ourselves that this thing we call church is more than a human community, but rather that there is a Source and Strength beyond us working through us, in spite of our weaknesses.

I hope that these past weeks with Anabaptist Essentials will give us a shared language for talking about where we have witnessed God's life-giving Spirit, and where God might be calling us next. May God bless you as you take time this week to remember that the lifegiving breath of the Spirit is as important as the oxygen of the air we breath that we need for our physical lives.

QUESTIONS

1. What image of the Holy Spirit speaks the most to you?
2. How do you define a "Spirit-filled" Christian?
3. How might an emphasis on the power and movement of the Spirit help us avoid becoming too focused on our own performance?