

Sunday 2nd June 2024 - That's The Spirit! : The Spirit of Holiness

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 June 2024

Preacher: Ruth Edmonds

- [0 : 00] So we've been talking about the Holy Spirit and how the Holy Spirit leads you in various ways. Last week, Matt talked about the very personal nature of the Spirit, encouraging signs and symbols, and how their life-giving presence can shape our lives.
- He also talked a bit about how this could be impressive and awesome and also a bit more gentle. Now, today we're going to talk about how the Holy Spirit encourages us in holiness.
- Now, I don't know about you, but I find holiness to be a bit of an intimidating word. I mean, it sounds a bit alien, not always a word that I understand.
- I could probably point you to holy things, but I probably wouldn't want to give you a definition on the spot. It can seem a little bit lofty, alien, and maybe even a tiny bit threatening.
- The passage that sometimes comes back to me is the passage where Moses is coming down from the mountain and the people cover their eyes because they don't want to see God because God is so holy.
- [1 : 07] And sometimes that's what I think about when I think about holiness. So to be clear, I chose to preach on holiness. This is my fault, and it was obviously a really good idea.
- So let's start with the Bible because it's often a good place to start. In the Bible, the word holiness is used in a lot of different ways, but it's always a property of something that is associated with God.
- Obviously, God is holy, not of this world completely. Spaces where you can feel God very clearly are also described as holy, and we're told the scriptures which bring us closer to God are holy.
- And so is the Ark of the Covenant, especially in that Indiana Jones season where it is obviously very dangerous to touch. And the mountain of transfiguration, where they see just how completely God, Jesus is, is also holy.
- All these things speak of God in a way that pull us away from the cycle of everyday life. They are not normal and human and keep us away from the cycles which keep turning in this world and distract people perhaps from God.
- [2 : 26] We're also told that we should strive towards being holy in the Bible. We've got the holiness laws in Leviticus 17, which I'm not going to talk about today. Fascinating reading.
- Obviously, a very complicated ceremonial culture, which talk about rituals for encountering God ceremonially. And in the Psalms and in the Proverbs, there's an understanding of human holiness that's linked to looking for righteousness and truth in the world, but also somehow linked to humility, not ego.
- So we have this idea that God feels holy. People can become holy through relation to God, through connection to God's righteousness and holiness.

And perhaps you can think of some people in your life who seem a bit holy, who seem to have been led close to the Holy Spirit. Now, I say this with a big disclaimer because, while I can think of people I do see as holy in this room, it is the case that human beings aren't ever completely holy, right?

Only God is. So even the people that seem to have that thing about them that makes you think this is a holy person, even those people, they're not going to get everything perfectly right and don't treat them like they are Jesus because they aren't.

[3 : 50] But, not naming names in this room, but some of the people who've been holy in my life, I can think of one in particular who is, I can only find this picture of him, and you can't even see his face, so it's not the best picture of him.

But that was kind of very typical. He was a priest called Reno at university. He was a big, larger-than-life character, still rocking the Beatles haircut and glasses well into the early 2000s.

He loved wine, he loved people, and he fought each and every day to make the world a better place. In fact, he is one of those intense Facebook accounts where every day you are being asked to join a new cause in a different part of the world, and sometimes you have to pause him for a bit because it got a bit overwhelming.

His sermons were intensely frustrated at the pain and longing for a better and more loving world. And yet, in spite of this intense desire for righteousness, he was also probably the most fun person I've ever met.

He was someone that always had the best time in the place he was. When he went to the best party, it was the best party it had ever been. Every single glass of wine that he tried, even from Wetherspoons, was the finest he had ever tasted.

[5 : 08] He would smooth conflict by just being in the room, and every Friday he would buy roses for his wife because she was the most beautiful he'd ever seen her that week. And that was kind of how he lived life.

He didn't seem to carry ordinary worries or anxieties, only big change-the-world ones. And when I think about other holy people in the world that I'm drawn to, they also seem to be those things, desperately concerned with making the world a better place and more in line with God's love.

And also somehow lighter than air in a complicated way. Like they don't need to angst over the kind of things that keep me up at night. Things like, I don't know, what I wear to a job interview or something like that.

These are the kind of people that would just throw on something in the back of their closet and just kind of get past that. People who don't live in the worldly envies and stresses and cycles of retribution, who aren't at all interested in status or in how other people respond to them.

So in this in mind, I'm always taken by, well, this image of Desmond Tutu meeting the Dalai Lama. I mean, they look like they're having the best time, don't they? It's actually not the happiest picture of them, but it's the happiest high resolution picture of them that I could find.

[6 : 28] These are two people who are widely considered holy in different communities. Two men who have lived through devastating conflicts and oppression and abuse and somehow managed to step above it with a grace and a forgiveness that I don't think would be possible without the Holy Spirit inspiring their holiness.

And when they meet together, they don't just talk the big talk, how to make the world a better place. They aren't filled with anxiety. They giggle like toddlers and tickle each other, which I would find quite perturbing, but obviously it works for them.

They are light from the desire to seem important or self-righteous or worldly. They don't compete, which you could imagine perhaps they might. Instead, they have a confidence and a joy in life which lets them look beyond all of that.

So that's enough about people being inspired to be holy. We're now going to come at holiness from a very slightly different angle and think about places that can be holy.

I'm sure we can all think of some places that feel holy. This church is one of them for a lot of people, a place where you encounter God, a place that inspires you and encourages you to find better places, ways to live well with God and with other people.

[7 : 51] Now, I can also think of a few other places like that in my life, places which have encouraged me to go out, to be closer to God, to feel less trapped in the cycles of the world, perhaps to feel holy.

And one of them that has been very important to me until recently has been pathway, a place which, at its worst, could seem quite grim, people living in extremely cramped accommodation, escaping from very stressful situations.

But it was also always a place where I felt God romping in the hallways and opening doors and windows for people that they didn't believe it was possible to open, a place of joy, of lightness, of burdens being cast away.

So those are holy places and holy people. And of course, the main way we use the word holy is to refer to the Holy Spirit, the part of God that we encounter personally, the part of God which I think probably is a little bit like Desmond Tutu in that I believe that the Holy Spirit, when I encounter her, she laughs and she dances and she shakes things up a bit, disturbing things perhaps, to encourage us to fly.

When I think about how the Holy Spirit encourages us to move towards God and holiness, there are a couple of passages in the Old Testament that really spring to mind. So the first one, of course, comes from Genesis.

[9 : 24] Genesis 2. Now the world was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

So we hear that word hover, hovering over the waters. And you can imagine a kind of ghostly figure. And when I used to think about it, before I looked into it more, I used to imagine a kind of stagnant stillness waiting to become something.

I thought of God's Spirit just simply being there. But when you look into that word hover, which in Hebrew is marah hefet, I'm not going to ask you to say it back because unlike Matt, I don't have the confidence in my Hebrew pronunciation.

Look it up online. I've got no idea. But that's how it's supposed to be said, all of those words. It's unusual. So it doesn't just mean to kind of hang there.

It means to flutter or to hover like a bird flapping its wings. And this is a verb that we also see in Deuteronomy 32, 17, which says, like an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young and spreads its wings to catch them and carries them aloft.

[10 : 40] So the word hover there is a very particular word, which if you're interested in birds, which I am, then it kind of has a particular understanding.

So all small birds, when they're born, are terrified of heights. I may have told you this before, but that's how they get to keep them in the nest because they look down and they think, oh no. If you're hand raising a bird, you'll know that when they start flying, they only want to fly up because flying down towards the ground with any velocity is absolutely terrifying to them.

So you can get to a stage where you end up climbing up a tree to catch your flying bird. But even before they leave the nest, they practice flying by flapping and jumping and copying the adults they see around them.

And then when their wings are strong enough and they're ready, then their parent bird kind of encourages them to take the jump out of the nest. Now the parent bird does this in a number of ways, which I think reflect the ways the Holy Spirit teaches us to be holy.

As the fledging starts to get ready to fly, the adult birds start withholding food or perching with food near the nest so they kind of have to jump out in order to get it.

[11 : 57] Or flying with food over the nest to tempt the nestlings to try and fly up. They also kind of shout at them and do low, slightly threatening circling over the nest to encourage them to try flying.

Low circling and vocalizations like the Holy Spirit does hovering over creation, willing it into being in Genesis. And when they're hungry, thirsty or confident enough, the nestlings fly.

And I think that is what happens when the Holy Spirit encourages us to be holy. She stirs things up, perhaps a little bit comfortably. She leads us in places that we may not feel.

And one of the ways that lots of people feel their journey to holiness takes them is that when you first become a Christian, every service is one where you really have huge feelings of God.

Then gradually, as your faith matures, the fields can be withdrawn because we can become reliant on them and they can get in the way of a deeper relationship with God.

[13 : 05] So leading us to fly towards holiness into a deeper reliance of God sometimes means encouraging you not to eat that snack but to leap out of the nest to greater closeness to the Spirit.

Now, that's something I've just thrown in there and it's perhaps quite a big topic. But if you come to church and you feel like you're not feeling it, it's worth looking into this idea of the dark night of the soul, which is part of the journey of faith for a lot of people.

And it can seem very troubling. So if you are experiencing that, you're not alone. So back to the Holy Spirit and her encouraging of our holiness. The other passage that comes to mind is one from Proverbs, which reflects on the role of the Holy Spirit in creation.

I'm going to read the whole of the Proverbs 8, 22 to 31 passage, but the bit I'm going to talk about is on the screen. She says, The Lord created me at the beginning of his works, the first of his acts long ago.

Ages ago, I was set up at the first before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths, I was brought forth. And when there were no springs abounding with water, before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth.

[14 : 25] When he had not yet made earth and fields or the world's first bits of soil. When he established the heavens, I was there. When he drew a circle on the face of the deep.

When he made firm the skies above. When he established the fountains of the deep. When he assigned the sea its limit so the waters might not transgress his command.

When he marked the foundations of the earth, there I was beside him like a master worker. And I was daily his delight. Rejoicing before him always.

Rejoicing in his inhabited world. And delighting in the human race. And I guess it is that joy I really want to talk about now.

That sense of the joy of God in God's creation. And the rejoicing and the delight that the Holy Spirit takes in God and God's creation. And I think that's a really important part of understanding how the Spirit leads us into holiness and a greater relationship with God.

[15 : 31] With joy, with delight, with collection to other people. So when we think about this, what does that mean for how we understand holiness? I think there is this huge temptation to think of holiness as a kind of purity.

You are holy if you don't do any of these terrible things. You never sin. You always get things right. And you're absolutely perfect in every way. You keep away from sinful people and you keep your face clean.

Away from mess. And you do ostentatiously holy things. And I think that that might be something that is a bit of a mistake that we see the Pharisees are described to have made in the New Testament.

A mistake of missing the message and trying to focus on just purity. And missing the chance of true encounter and joy in the holiness which is there in the mess of creation.

And the strivings on those we put on the outside and then we miss out on so much. This understanding of holiness has more truth to it, I believe.

[16 : 35] It can be sometimes easy to hear from God on your own. But I think the risk of imagining holiness as purity, as cleanliness, as isolated isn't like learning to fly.

It's more like freezing yourself into a little individual ice cube. And then in the end, you're cold and alone. Whereas the vision of the flight of the eagle with the parent eagle there, that seems to have more truth to me.

When I think about what the holy people I've met have in common, I'd say confidence. Not this kind of confidence. Not the naff confidence of a slick suit and a wallet full of cash.

Or the confidence that comes with being watered with worldly compliments. But a deeper, truer confidence. A confidence from knowing that God's got you. That you can be silly and human rather than seemingly important.

And that God will catch you if you fall. A confidence that lets you climb out of your nest and flap your wings and soar. A confidence that comes from really, really knowing that God loves you.

[17 : 48] From feeling God around you, next to you. So how do we get there? How do we deeply learn that God loves us? So that it imbues us with confidence going forward.

I guess like learning to fly, it takes practice. And practice often means prayer. It also means spending time around places and people that inspire you to be the person that you feel you're being called to be.

Spending time encountering God and working about caring about the things that God cares about. Like making the world into a place where justice is everywhere.

Where people are overwhelmed with the possibility of joy when no one goes hungry. And I think this last bit is really important. I think throwing yourself into loving the world, into seeing the hungry fed and the captives free is somehow really crucial to experiencing God and holiness.

I can't think of anyone that I consider holy who isn't really engaged in making the world a better, more loving place. Even the enclosed nuns I know wake and pray earnestly for the needs of the world.

[19 : 06] But if you're lucky enough not to be called to the cloister, like most of us, I think, are, then most of us are not called to the cloister. Sorry. I was an incorrect saying.

Do not all join a nunnery unless you really feel that's where God is taking you. But somehow being the hands and the feet seems important. Praying and spending time surrounded by God and the love of God feels important.

And then perhaps as the baby eagles do, when they're ready and they've strengthened their wings, you need to let go and soar. And I guess letting go is the hardest bit.

It means letting go of all the crutches that we use to manage our egos and our confidence on a daily basis. The times when we try and not let people tell us what they really think so they can't criticise us, so you apologise for everything you've done before they've even started.

The time... I do that. That's coming from a place of knowledge. The time we seek out people to stroke our egos or we try and win pointless cycles of one-upmanship in having things or making money or other empty promises, which can make you feel good in the short term, but in the long term, wear off.

[20 : 23] They don't offer that deep happiness. And then soaring. What does that feel like? I guess I think it feels a bit like this. The lightness and confidence of knowing that you are held by God, that God has got us, that you don't need to fear falling because God will catch you.

That is the promise of the confidence of holiness that allows us the potential for the joy, the joy of flying together, the joy of freedom of expression and the joy of not caring about looking silly so that, like Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama, you can have a tickle fight as an adult and no one will think you're weird.

Amen.