

DISPLACING EVIL

When we live in God's household...we are filled with the Spirit
Ephesians 5:15-20

We have sung, I don't know how many times this morning,
the inspiring mantra,
"Breathe out, breathe in, and be filled."
It's uplifting to our spirits to sing,
"breathe out, breathe in, and be filled."
It's comforting, it's reassuring,
it just makes us *want* to be filled with the Spirit of God.

You may *want* to be filled,
but I would think twice, before you decide to *do* it.
It's dangerous. *Really*.

Let me just remind you what happened to some *other* people
who very innocently decided to breathe in
and be filled with the Spirit of God.

The Old Testament prophets—Elijah, Elisha, Isaiah, Micah, Amos—
were often said to be filled with the Spirit.
That's what enabled their work.
And that's what got them in all kinds of trouble.
By the Spirit's breath in them,
they delivered all kinds of unpopular messages—
pointing out sin, condemning injustice,
announcing doom and death to royalty.
They were often driven out of town
barely escaping with their lives . . . if they were *lucky*.
living on the meager rations of a kind widow,
or a raven sent by God.

We're told Zechariah and Elizabeth were filled with the Spirit,
as was their son John the Baptist.
And what followed was a life of hardship for John,
and heartache for his parents.
John's preaching, inspired by this Spirit,
got him thrown into prison, and eventually beheaded.

Of course, Jesus *himself* was filled with the Spirit.

We read in Luke 4,

"Full of the Holy Spirit, Jesus returned from the Jordan
and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness."

Being Spirit-filled earned Jesus forty days of hunger, thirst,
and multiple assaults by Satan in the wilderness.

And right *after* that we are told that Jesus,

"filled with the power of the Spirit,"

returned to Galilee, and began to teach in their synagogues.

Immediately the opposition moved in.

In the very next scene his own townspeople
tried to throw him off a cliff.

He escaped, but it only got worse,
and we all know where it ended.

Crucifixion.

The first believers in the early church

were all filled with the Spirit, we read in Acts 2.

They had good fellowship with each other,

but a terrible period of persecution and terrorism

was unleashed on members of this radical community.

Peter, *while* he was making his defense before the authorities,

according to Acts 4, was filled with the Spirit.

Immediately, they threw him in prison.

Stephen, one of the first deacons in the early church,

was "a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit" (Acts 6).

He began to preach the gospel,

under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

He was stoned to death.

And Saul, after being prayed for by Ananias,

regained his sight and was filled with the Holy Spirit, it says.

And over the years, his preaching and evangelistic work

resulted in him being imprisoned, whipped, beaten, stoned,

shipwrecked, and, in his own words from 2 Corinthians,

"in danger from rivers, danger from bandits,

danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles,

danger in the city, danger in the wilderness,
danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters;
in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night,
hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked.”

So, you want to breathe in and be filled with the Holy Spirit! . . .
It's a noble thought.
But maybe you'd like some more time to think about it.
It's *not safe*, being filled with the Spirit.

A few weeks ago when I shared excerpts of sermons from Columbus,
you heard Jim Schrag, retiring Executive of the denomination,
call on us in the church to “unfurl our sails”
to open the sails of our church,
and expect the wind of God to blow, to fill those sails,
and move us along.

But that's risky business,
because the Spirit of God blows *where it will*.
If we open our sails to the wind of God,
there's no way of knowing *where* we'll end up.
We can't predict or control the wind.
We may get blown away. We may be dead in the water.

So, you want to breathe in and be filled with the Spirit?
Take heed . . . watch out . . . you're putting your life on the line.
Which, when you think about it,
is really the whole point of being filled with the Spirit.
It's laying down your self-centered life,
in *favor* of living a life under the control of the Holy Spirit.

We would much prefer to think of
breathing in and being filled with the Spirit
as being something completely reassuring, gentle, peaceful.
The soft flutter of the wings of a white dove,
is so comforting, so tender.
And I'd be tempted to believe that,
if it wasn't for the way the Bible talks about the Spirit.

Even at Jesus' baptism, when a dove *did* descend from heaven,
the scene was not accompanied by harp music
and a softly glowing sky as a backdrop.
It was actually an explosive scene.
Mark says when Jesus came out of the water,
“he saw the heavens torn apart
and the Spirit descending like a dove.”
That Greek word for being torn apart, to split, to divide,
is only used one other time in Mark's gospel—
when the veil of the temple is ripped from top to bottom,
at the moment of Jesus' death on the cross.
Interesting . . . that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry,
and at the end,
something was ripped open violently,
and the barrier separating the divine and the human
was taken away.
That's what happens when the Spirit blows in.
The barrier that makes us feel safe and secure,
is ripped apart.

Oh, but it's a wonderful, exhilarating ripping apart.
Because this wild and wonderful Spirit of God
that blows in and takes us where we weren't planning to go,
is the very same Spirit whose nature is
to give life and truth and beauty and goodness.

In Genesis 1, at Creation,
the Spirit of God blew on the dark and formless and chaotic
waters of the cosmos.
And the result was life—true, magnificent life.
God blew his breath into a lump of clay,
and a living, breathing, human soul was born.
God wants our lives to be filled with God's breath.
So that we will live . . . *truly* live as God intended
when God created us in God's own image.

But we have a lot working against us,
when it comes to being filled with the Spirit.

Our lives are *already filled* . . .
with all sorts of other things that distract us from life.
They *masquerade* as life,
but in actuality, they diminish life.
Nothing new, of course.
This is precisely what the apostle saw happening
in the church of Asia Minor,
which prompted the letter to the Ephesians.

The church was being drawn away from a full life in God,
because they were allowing themselves to be filled with other things.
And you can't be filled with two things at once.
You have a one-pint container *filled* with water,
and you pour in a cup of oil,
you're going to lose a cup of water.
The water *will be* displaced.

I think that's sort of what the apostle was telling the Ephesians,
in chapter 5, vv. 15-18.
"Be careful then how you live,
not as unwise people but as wise,
making the most of the time, because the days are evil.
Do *not get drunk with wine*, for that is debauchery;
but be *filled with the Spirit*."

There is a lot in this world to distract you
from the life God has in mind for you, Paul was saying.
So be careful. Be wise. Be discerning.
Understand what the will of God is, and live in it.
Surround yourself with that which is worthwhile.
Make the most of the time, because the days are evil.
Be filled with the Spirit,
because, simply, it will *displace the evil*
that otherwise might overtake you.

Another way of saying this might be,
don't be overcome by fear of all the evil around you.
Displace the evil with the Holy Spirit.
Invite the Spirit of God to take its place.

Open yourself, breathe *in* . . .
invite the Spirit to fill every space,
and breathe *out*,
releasing whatever is life-diminishing,
releasing whatever there isn't room for anymore,
releasing what the Spirit displaces.

These words from Ephesians are tremendously encouraging,
life-giving,
and burden-lifting.
It's a refreshing approach to life in a sinful, broken, and violent world.
Yes, the days are evil.
We need not look far to realize that.
All around the world nations are falling apart,
awash in the evil of oppression, of poverty,
of natural and human-caused disasters.
There is also real personal evil all around.
Individuals who rebel against all that is good,
and wreak destruction and havoc in other people's lives.

Some people live in a near-constant state of panic,
in the face of all this overwhelming evil.
Afraid their own lives will crumble under the weight of it all.
Some people . . . *many* people . . .
deal with the pain and evil that life brings,
by trying to hide from it, conceal it, numb themselves to it.
That's what v. 18 is about in Ephesians 5.
"Do not get drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit."

You cannot find freedom from pain and evil
by running from, trying to cover up,
or escaping into a drunken semiconsciousness.

No, you find freedom from evil, by displacing it.
Crowding it out.
Being filled with what is life-giving, and life-forming.

Vv. 19-20:
"Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves,
singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts,

giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

That’s the way to live in an evil world.

Don’t wallow in ways of this world,
the fear-mongering,
the hand-wringing,
the foolishness of living by your fears,
drinking yourself into numbness and oblivion.

No, the way to deal with the evil world,
is to get together and sing! *Sing!!*

Yes, that’s what Paul says.

Sing *out* the evil, by singing *in* the Spirit.

This is communal spiritual engagement against evil, and the evil one.

You *sing away the devil*.

The Ephesians text we looked at last Sunday said
don’t let the sun go down on your anger,
because “it makes room for the devil.”

The devil can’t live where there’s no room, so to speak.

The gathering together of Christians
to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs
displaces the devil . . .

because singing the music of the Spirit
invites the Spirit to fill us.

I’ll tell you what.

The next time you turn on the news and get depressed by it,
the next time you find yourself in an emotional funk,
because you see no way out of the mess this world is in,
the next time you get discouraged and hopeless
by the violence in the Middle East,
by the abuse of power in Washington,
by the wanton destruction of polar caps and rainforests,
by the millions of war refugees around the world,
by the chronic homelessness in Harrisonburg,
by the institutional paralysis of the church,
the next time any personal, or systemic, evil
starts pulling you down . . .

I have a concrete suggestion for you.
It will work every time. *Guaranteed*.

Get on the phone, call up some friends from church,
invite them over, and tell them to bring their hymnals.

I mean that literally.

Have a little community hymn sing.

I can assure you,
as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
the Holy Spirit will be present in your singing,
and the spirit of death and destruction and evil
that would like to overtake and overwhelm us,
will be displaced.
It will be crowded out.

And no, this is not an escape mechanism.

Not at *all*.

We don’t sing so we forget about the evil.

We don’t sing to distract ourselves from it.

We sing, so we are equipped to deal with it.

So we are not overcome by it,
but able to confront it,
and transform it.

When the last chord of the hymn dies away,
we still have our work to do,
or rather, *God’s* work to do.

But singing will reorient us to the truth of the gospel.

That in Jesus Christ,

God saves, redeems, transforms, and reconciles.

And we are invited to collaborate with the Holy Spirit
in that saving mission of God.

So let’s not delay another moment.

Let us sing the Spirit into us right now.

Into our personal beings.

Into our collective being as a church.

Turn to #349 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*.

“Spirit of the living God fall afresh on me.”
I invite us to sing it through *once*, as written,
for ourselves . . .
then sing it a *second* time, as a collective body.
“Spirit of the living God fall afresh on us.
Melt us, mold us, fill us, use us.”

—*Phil Kniss, August 16, 2009*