



Apostles' Creed 5
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Isaiah 61; Luke 4:14-21; 1 Peter 1:13-16

I Believe in God

The Spirit of the Lord is Upon Me

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Over the last 23 years of pastoral ministry I have become convinced that our greatest fear is that we are stuck with ourselves. We would all love to be a little different. And the marketing departments of most corporations are counting on that, because that's how they peddle products - promising to improve you.

Here is a sampling from the current New York Times bestseller list for Advice Books:

The Automatic Millionaire: A One Step Plan to Live and Finish Rich

Rich Dad; Poor Dad: Teaching One's Children How to Get Rich and Stay Rich

The South Beach Diet

Three different Atkins diet books

The Proper Care and Feeding of Husbands.

Apparently money, dieting, and relationships are among our favorite ways for improving life. But no matter how much money you get, or how many pounds you lose, it is still you who shows up in the mirror in the morning. Frankly, that is the person we are all most worried about.

We have been worried about ourselves from the beginning, and that is what has caused most of the problems with both the self and the world. According to Genesis, when we were created, we were placed in a garden that was filled with good fruit of which we could freely partake. We could have so many blessings, except the fruit of one tree which just happened to be in the middle of the garden. This is God's idea of a good creation - we were never meant to have it all. This drove Adam and Eve, and you and me nuts. We are not whole! Something is missing. So where do we pitch our tent? Beneath the one thing we do not have. "Let the rest of the garden go to weed. How can I live without what is missing?"

So we reach for what is beyond our created limitations. It is then that we are exiled from the garden, and it is then that we realize even though something was missing, it really was paradise. But now, paradise lost. The hardest thing about this exile, though, is not that we lost so many blessings, but we lost the place where we knew communion with the Creator. As the Early Church Fathers reminds us, when we fell from communion from God we brought the whole world down with us. As a result, all of creation is exiled from paradise.

This image of exile from God is a persistent theme that is woven into biblical narrative. Isaiah wrote his prophecy to a people who were facing exile from the holy land because God got fed up with how self absorbed they had become. This exile was devastating to the Hebrews, not only because they had to watch the Babylonian armies destroy everything they had built for themselves but also because they were removed from the place where they could find God. Now the people were in captivity - exiled in a foreign land.

While so much of his prophecy is relentless in explaining the justice of God in leveling this judgement, Isaiah also offers consoling words that promise a coming restoration from exile. But his promise isn't just that one day they will be able to come back to Jerusalem. His promise is that one day a servant of the Lord will restore all of creation to the glory of paradise. You'll know when that servant arrives, Isaiah claims, because the Spirit of the Lord will be upon him. This is the same Spirit who once hovered over creation, pushing aside

the darkness and chaos, creating light and beauty in its place. When that Spirit is poured out upon the Lord's servant, all will be, not improved, but restored to communion with the Creator.

Like all preachers, Isaiah has a few homiletical devices that he loves to use over and over. Throughout this prophecy, he keeps weaving in phrases about the Spirit of the Lord between the long descriptions of judgment. In chapter eleven we are told that a shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse and the Spirit of the Lord shall be upon him. When that happens, then the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, as they were created to do in paradise. In chapter thirty-two Isaiah promises that when the Spirit from on high is poured out on us, the desert wilderness will again become a fruitful field. In chapter forty-two, "I will put my Spirit upon this servant and he will bring forth justice to the nations." But it is in chapter sixty-one that we receive a vision of the day this Servant of the Lord shall say, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God." It is striking that Isaiah includes this note of vengeance and judgment at the end of so much hope. He cannot help but remind us of this grim consequence to self absorption.

For centuries and centuries, the people waited for this servant of the Lord, this Messiah, who would bring about the restoration of creation. Until one day, in an unimportant village in Galilee, a rabbi named Jesus was asked to read the scripture on the Sabbath day. He chose these words from Isaiah sixty-one. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor..." and on Jesus continues through the well rehearsed lines of the prophecy. But instead of concluding with the phrase about the day of vengeance of God, he omitted that, and said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Do you see? Jesus Christ removes the judgment of exile from us. That is what Jesus' mission was all about. As the incarnation of God, Christ restores us to communion with our Creator. Exiles are brought home to God. Humanity is restored to those who had become less than human. And all creation can know recreation. Because the Spirit of the Lord has anointed this.

When Jesus was conceived, it was by the Holy Spirit - the same spirit that worked at creation. When Jesus was baptized in an identification with us, the Spirit descended on him as a dove. Then the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness where he was tempted as we are. The Spirit led him day after day to a ministry of healing and the forgiveness of sin. All of it was a way of pressing the incarnation deeper and deeper, *binding Christ to us*.

When we get to the epistles of the New Testament, we find the authors constantly referring to the role of the Spirit who *binds us into Christ*. In the words of Paul, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God" (Romans 8:14) "In Christ, we have redemption, through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace." (Ephesians 1:7) In the words of Peter "Set your hope on the grace of Jesus Christ... for as it is written you shall be holy, for I am holy." That's not an imperative. It's a promise. As you live in Christ, you *shall* be holy because Christ is holy.

You don't become holy by trying to follow Jesus's teachings. That's just one more self improvement program that won't work any better than the others. You are made holy by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit who adopts you into the Son's beloved relationship with the Father. And the world isn't made by holy by our improvements upon it. Rather it is made holy by the Son anointed of the Spirit to bring the world home to the Father.

What this means is that between the Father, the Son, and Spirit all the necessary roles for our salvation, for the salvation of the world, have been taken. Thus, we are not necessary. We are cherished as the prodigals who have been restored, but we are not needed. The Triune God does not need your help in raising children

or caring for the poor and oppressed. There is only one Servant who has the job of being the Messiah, and he doesn't need help making improvements. If you start to think of yourself as necessary, then you are making yourself the messiah.

So there's nothing left for us to do? Oh no. What is left is being the Spirit-filled witness. When the Spirit fills the life of a disciple, that person is turned into an apostle who goes into all the world witnessing the salvation of Christ who holds all things together. Thus, the mission of the Christian is to see this Messiah who makes all things holy by his presence.

There isn't any longer just one place that is holy land. Now no land is foreign to God, for in Christ all places are being restored to God. This includes your days which are jammed packed with car pools and dirty laundry, copy machines that jam when you need them most, phones that keep ringing and computers that keep crashing, and office meetings that go on forever and accomplish nothing. None of it is outside the realm of holiness. Neither are the impoverished neighborhoods around us. Neither are the third world villages that struggle against starvation and disease. Neither are the homes of the affluent and middle class.

Christ has brought all of creation back to God. He can be found in every corner of the earth - wherever the Spirit of the Lord is healing, forgiving, and bringing the exile home. And so we too will go home, go to work, and go to the poor, not just to make improvements but to find our Savior.

“Holy, Holy, Holy. The whole earth is full of his glory.” Amen.