

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

If you forget about the Holy Spirit this Advent, you will have lots of company. We all know the players in the Christmas story, don't we? It's God, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men and the little family – Joseph, Mary and Baby Jesus. But where's God's Spirit? When did the Holy Spirit ever get a lead role in a Christmas pageant?

Stop and think what this whole season is about! It is about Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, taking on flesh and being born into human life. We call that a fancy name – the Incarnation – but it is just Latin for “in flesh.” (We get the “in” part, and the Latin word *carne* means “flesh.”)

The Incarnation describes what happened when God decided (in the fullness of time, as they say) to enter our world in human form, or became incarnate. In the weeks leading up to the celebration of Jesus' birth, we think about his Advent (his arrival) and ponder this amazing mystery. God's Spirit sets the stage for this and participates in the creation of life.

Our lessons today all point us in the direction of God's Spirit, that third person of the Trinity, who with Jesus and God the Creator, dwell in a community of infinite love and mutuality. The prophet Isaiah speaks of a time when such love and mutuality will pervade the earth. Although he does not use Trinitarian language, the astonishing result is the same: ***“the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”***

In the Letter to the Romans, we hear about a time when in the name of Jesus, Gentiles and Jews will be united in glorifying God, in love and mutuality. And our reading this morning ends in a prayer for that day to come: ***“May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”***

The prophet John, though his words thunder (John liked to thunder!) and are filled with accusations and threats against those he perceives as not carrying out God's will, also speaks of the coming of one who will ***“Baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”***

So you see that God's Spirit shows up a lot during our Advent season and is deeply involved with the coming of Jesus.

Here's the problem for us humans: we have a fair amount of difficulty wrapping our minds around the Incarnation mystery. We really like to shy away from too much examination of it. If many of us were to be honest, we would admit that we like to separate Baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, and the heart-breaking, heart-opening Jesus Christ who died on the Cross and was raised from the dead. But let's try putting the Christmas side of the paper and the Easter side of the paper together. Like a Mobius strip, we find that God's spirit moves effortlessly from Incarnation to Resurrection, because it is the completion of love. And God's community of love wants us to share in that Isaiah vision, that prayer of mutuality, and the reality of John's prophecy.

Now how can we do this?

First, you must experience love. When you know what love is, the world looks different – you know that. Love brings hope. That's what our saints know. That is why they shine their beacons of love down through the ages for us – so that we remember what love looks like. When it is darkest, it is easiest to see a light. When we have experienced love, we can talk about it, practice it and share it. Love glows through the darkest night.

Our Room at the Inn team will shortly welcome a family of refugees, who will arrive in Philadelphia with what little they can carry. We and the team at St. Martin's will welcome them and try in practical ways to show them what love looks like. And then, they can begin to have hope – that life will improve, that their children can be raised in safety, that there will be jobs and food and security at last.

When you have love and hope long enough, then you can begin to have faith. You can begin to trust God and your neighbors once again, and let your faith grow as your community grows.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit – showing us what God's Trinity of love looks like in our world. When we do a kindness, say a word of love and respect to a neighbor, co-worker or stranger, bring food and Giving Tree gifts to share, we enter this blessed space that Isaiah prophesied. We bring Incarnation consciousness into our world. And because the Holy Spirit works in wonderful and mysterious ways, love can spread like a virus – exponentially fast.

There's a new gene-splicing technology that's been developed. It's called CRISPR (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats) CRISPR takes a little bit of genetic material and inserts it into the DNA molecules that make up a gene. By doing that, it changes the characteristics of that gene. For example, it has been suggested that the technology can be used to make the mosquitos that carry the Zika virus and some other nasty diseases infertile, so that they can no longer breed and devastate a region. Now whether you approve or disapprove of this kind of research and technology, I want you to focus on what is happening using this technology.

God's Spirit and Jesus are doing this in our souls. Once that little snippet of divine grace we call love has entered into our hearts, we are changed. It is what John the Baptizer was warning about. Jesus would soon come and baptize with the Holy Spirit, and that bit of divine love would take root in our hearts. Over the course of our lives, that bit of love is given the chance to grow by loving ourselves and by loving others. So we hope. Even in the face of outer darkness, of pain and disappointment, if we remember what love is, we can shine the beam of hope. And hope can grow into faith, and faith shares hope and love.

Remember that Mobius strip I mentioned earlier? The one that the Holy Spirit moves effortlessly around connecting the Incarnation of Jesus with his Resurrection? That Mobius strip is each of us. That's what the Holy Spirit is doing in our souls if we let Advent do its work in our hearts.

So we probably won't see God's Spirit directly in our Christmas pageant this year. But when you feel love, or hope, or joy, wonder and mystery somewhere deep inside over the next three weeks, you'll know who's there, won't you?

Here's to our Christmas Spirit!

*Amen.*